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This study challenged the traditional conception of disability as an individual problem and problematized the invisibility of young females with disabilities in the juvenile justice system in educational research. The purpose of this study was to contextualize the experience of disability and its intersectionality with race, gender, and social class. In doing so, the study aimed to elucidate a range of challenges that young females with disabilities must handle in and outside schools.

The selected method was a qualitative mode of inquiry. The participants were comprised of ten females between 12 and 17 years of age. Multiple methodologies were utilized to give participants voices, prioritize their perspectives, and make their everyday struggles visible in educational scholarship.

The study demonstrated that the experience of disability is a complex social phenomenon. It was revealed that the deep-seated cultural assumptions and images of disability permeated school practices and continued to subjugate young females with disabilities. When disability intersected with race, gender, and social class, the overlapping effects of multiple marginalities produced greater barriers for young females with multiple margins to obtaining equal educational opportunities. This study recognized the need to redefine disability in order to transform educational practices and empower young females at multiple margins.

COUNTER-HEGEMONIC DISCOURSE ON THE EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY:  
RETRIEVING THE VOICES OF FEMALE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES  
WHO ARE INVOLVED IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
A Note on Terminology <i>Disabled</i> .....	4
Statement of the Problem.....	5
The Purpose of the Study.....	6
Significance of the Study .....	7
Personal Statement.....	7
II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....	13
The Invisibility of the Experience of Disability .....	15
Problematizing Invisibilities of Female Students with Disabilities .....	20
Research Questions .....	23
Conceptual Framework .....	24
Introduction to Emancipatory Disability Research .....	24
The Traditional Approach to Disability—Medical Model .....	26
Reconceptualization of Disability as a Social Phenomenon.....	29
Emancipatory Disability Research as a Conceptual Framework .....	33
Theoretical Framework .....	39
Feminist Disability Theory .....	39
Disability as a Form and Means of Social Oppression .....	43
Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit).....	48
Voices that Matter.....	57
Through the Intersecting Lenses of Disability, Gender, Race, and Class .....	58
Profiling Gender: Young Females in the Juvenile Justice System .....	60
(Mis)Conceptualization of Female Delinquency .....	67
Female Delinquency as a Social and Political Construct.....	70
Limitation of Professional Gaze on Gender, Race, and Class as Mutually Exclusive Categories .....	75
Stamped with an Essence: Delinquency, Disability, and Differences .....	80
A New Direction toward Research Inquiry as Emancipatory	

	Page
Dialogues .....	84
III. METHODOLOGY .....	86
Methodological Framework.....	86
Critical Ethnography .....	87
Narrative Inquiry .....	90
(Counter) Storytelling .....	92
Time and Length of the Study .....	93
Research Relationship.....	94
Sampling Strategy and Defined Characteristics of Participants.....	94
Data Collection Strategies.....	96
Interviewing .....	96
Observation .....	98
Fieldnotes and memos.....	99
Other forms of data .....	100
Methods of Data Analysis.....	100
IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION .....	104
Background Information of the Research Context .....	105
Research Question 1: What Does It Mean to Be a Young Female with a Disability? .....	109
“We are Rarely Heard Out” .....	112
“Make It Known” .....	120
The Systems of Disempowerment .....	122
The Institutionalized Values that Determine “Problems” .....	123
The Social Practices that Create the Culture of Protection and Survival.....	134
“It’s a Whole Big Misunderstanding” .....	141
The Relevance of the Girls’ Everyday Talk to the Experience of Disability .....	148
Research Question 2: To What Extent Do Adolescent Females with Disabilities Who are Involved in the Juvenile Justice System Consider Disability as Part of Their Identities? To What Extent Do They Attribute Their Life Challenges to Their Disability? .....	151
A Talk about Talking about Disability .....	153
“We Don’t Talk about That” .....	155
Research Question Evolved and Modified .....	160



	Page
Experiencing Disability—Lavon .....	161
Experiencing Disability—Adoncia.....	168
Experiencing Disability—Monica .....	173
Experiencing Disability—Renee .....	182
Recollecting the Experiences of Disability.....	196
Research Question 3: In What Ways Do Disability and the Intersecting Social Categories, Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Social Class Contribute to Adolescent Females’ Perceived Constraints or Strengths in Achieving Academic and Vocational Success?.....	200
“Like Everyone Else” .....	201
“Dare to Be Different” .....	214
“I Want to Live My Life, Like Everybody Else Does” .....	217
“They Know Where I’m Coming From” .....	222
Precondition for Understanding.....	242
“Push Me Harder” .....	244
“I’m Gonna Do the Highest That I Can” .....	254
 V. CONCLUSION.....	 266
Personal Reflections on the Study .....	266
Unexpected Dimensions of the Study.....	271
Methodological Dilemmas.....	271
Dilemma of Writing and Being a Disabled Researcher.....	273
Limitations of the Study.....	275
Implications and Recommendations for Future Research .....	276
Final Remarks .....	277
 REFERENCES .....	 279
 APPENDIX A. A LIST OF SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS .....	 301
APPENDIX B. A SHORT QUESTIONNAIRE.....	303
APPENDIX C. KEY TO TRANSCRIPTS.....	305
APPENDIX D. FOOTNOTES.....	306
APPENDIX E. PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS.....	307
APPENDIX F. EXAMPLES OF WORKING FREE NODES .....	308

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

BETWEEN me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word (Du Bois, 1903, pp. 43-44).

Scholars and researchers who advocate educational equality continue to argue that discriminatory practice based on gender is a much neglected form of social oppression against female students in the American educational system. Female students remain invisible and silent in educational research, particularly those at social, cultural, economic, and political margins, including female students of color, female students with disabilities, female students coming from low-income families, and female students who are involved in the juvenile justice system (Asch, 2001; Bauer, 2001; Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004; Langhout, 2005; Wehmeyer & Rousso, 2001; Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002).

A salient example of this negligence is located in the long-standing issue concerning the disproportionate representation of students of color and students from low socioeconomic status in special education programs and in the juvenile justice system. The issue of the racial, class, and gender disproportionality in special education dates back to at least as early as the late 1960s. More than four decades after Deno (1970) and

Dunn (1968) highlighted the significant influence of sociocultural factors in special education practices, issues pertaining to the disproportionality in special education as well as in the juvenile justice system are far from settled. Recent studies still identify racial, class, and gender disproportionality as major concerns in the field (e.g., Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005; Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Coutinho & Oswald, 2005; De Valenzuela, Copeland, Huaging, & Park, 2006; Obiakor & Utley, 2004; Wald & Losen, 2003).

Given the continuing disparity, a group of education and special education scholars have argued that while the majority of educational research likely has linked school failure experienced by students at multiple margins to their functional limitations, the real issue of disproportionate representation for students of color and with low income is not disability in itself. Rather, it has stemmed from the discriminatory educational and social practices that continue to overlook and perpetuate various forms of social forces and conditions against students, who historically are racially, culturally, and economically marginalized (e.g., Losen & Welner, 2001; Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997; Obiakor & Utley, 2004; Pugach, 2001; Solorzano, 1997; Wald, & Losen, 2003). When disability status intersects with other social categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, and social class, students who are at multiple margins are vulnerable to complex forms of structural and institutional discrimination (Morrison & Epps, 2002; Wald & Losen, 2003; Watts & Erevelles, 2004).

Viewed through this lens, then, disableism is not the only social barrier many students who are identified as having a disability must confront and overcome. In and

outside the school context, they constantly are challenged by intersecting patterns of social inequalities on the basis of their frames of reference (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Watts & Erevelles, 2004). In order to transform the inequitable practices in education, efforts need to be made to critically expose, examine, and analyze the hidden ideology and its mechanisms embedded in discursive educational as well as social practices (Artiles, 2003; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Watts & Erevelles, 2004).

Typically, when these critical issues are highlighted and debated, male students of color with low income are identified as being targeted for gender and other forms of discriminatory educational practices in the existing educational system. Regrettably, such debate hardly has extended its lens to female students who also are subordinated, marginalized, and treated unfairly within schools and other social contexts based on their gender, race, ethnicity, social class, and disability status (Caseau, Luckasson & Kroth, 1994; Langhout, 2005; Oswald, Best, Coutinho, & Nagle, 2003; MacDonald & Chesney-Lind, 2001; Wehmeyer & Rousso, 2001; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001a). Few researchers have interrogated how disability as an exclusionary system intersects with other exclusionary systems of race, gender, and class and how these exclusionary systems work simultaneously and differently against female students with disabilities at multiple margins.

As a result, few theories in mainstream special education scholarship have addressed adequately the seriousness of the persistent and continuing oppressive social conditions in schools and other educational settings that significantly affect not only the academic and vocational aspirations of female students at multiple margins but also their

opportunity structure in pursuing economic stability and social mobility (Arnot, 2000; Campbell, 2003 December/ 2004 January; Lee, 2001; Lichtenstein, 1996; Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002). The invisibility of female students with disabilities facing multiple life challenges suggest the insensitivity of the field to the complex forms of social oppression that impede these female students from obtaining equitable educational opportunities. This study conceptualizes the invisibility of female students who long have been positioned at the bottoms of social, cultural, economic, and political hierarchies as synonymous with social oppression.

The title of this study expresses its conceptual and theoretical orientation and direction. Four underlying themes represented in the title are these: (a) a conceptual, ideological, and theoretical shift from the hegemonic discourse of disability as a medical, individual problem to a complex social phenomenon; (b) a challenge to the positivistic scientific logic and rhetoric that prioritize and legitimate neutrality and objectivity in scholarship; (c) research as praxis in an emancipatory framework; and (d) a positioning of the perspectives and voices of female students with disabilities who are involved in the juvenile justice system at the center of the inquiry. These themes highlight the necessity of combating social inequality in and outside school context and devoting ears to the voices of female students with disabilities who are involved in the juvenile justice system.

### **A Note on Terminology *Disabled***

I use the term *disabled* throughout this study in referring to scholars and researchers with disabilities who identify themselves with *disabled*, the historical,

cultural, and political marker, and not with *ones with disabilities*, often referred to as person-first language. I do so out of respect for their choice of not passing but politicizing their disabilities and for their commitment to social transformation of individuals with disabilities through research, political action, and the promotion of the disability studies movement in academic community. I also identify myself as a disabled female and critical researcher in order to make explicit my positionality that has led to the current study. The use of *disabled* to describe my own frame of reference also demonstrates my paradigmatic posturing that this study is not independent from my subjectivity that is a part of my experiential as well as professional knowledge. I chose not to hide my subjectivity, but instead to conceptualize it as the researcher's analytic voice (Delgado Barnel, 1998; Ladson-Billing, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 2003).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The invisibility of female students with disabilities in educational research and theory means that little attention has been paid to gender and other forms of inequities at work in the existing educational system. The lack of attention to the invisibility of female students with disabilities, particularly those who are placed at the bottoms of social, cultural, and economic hierarchies, also reveals that the field's insensitivity or indifference to oppressive social conditions in schools and other social contexts impedes this student population from receiving the equal educational opportunities it deserves. Furthermore, the lack of research and theory reflecting female students' perspectives, voices, or social realities indicate that the field's overall knowledge about the complexity of the experience of disability has lacked multidimensionality. This also indicates that the

field's understanding about the experience of disability may have been irrelevant to the meaning which young females give to their everyday experience. When a large number of students with disabilities at multiple margins continue to struggle with school learning, educational researchers can no longer ignore the seriousness of the void of their voices in research, theory, and practice. Educational researchers need to assume a critical role in improving educational services that will help young females thrive and leave strong from schools with a school diploma.

### **The Purpose of the Study**

In this study, I will use a critical approach to contextualize the experience of disability that intersects with other social categories for adolescent females with high incidence disabilities who are involved in the juvenile justice system. In doing so, I will aim to critically analyze the social conditions in educational institutions that shape their educational experiences, opportunity structures, identities, and needs. To do this, I will conceptualize my experiential knowledge as an epistemological and analytic lens that sees the experience of disability from an insider's view. Through my epistemological lens I also will shift disability from a medical condition or individual problem to a social category akin to race, gender, or class.

I will situate my study within a conceptual framework of emancipatory disability research. I also will utilize feminist disability theory, critical race theory, and Latino critical theory as an integrated theoretical framework and methodology. The central theme I wish to locate in these conceptual and theoretical frameworks is the importance and necessity of counter-hegemonic ideological, theoretical, and methodological

approaches to the understanding of disability experience as a complex social phenomenon. My use of a qualitative research method will serve to signify my study as a commitment to research as a critical cultural work or praxis.

### **Significance of the Study**

This inquiry is a much needed undertaking to position the perspective of adolescent females facing multiple life challenges at the center of the inquiry process in order to (a) gain a better understanding about the barriers, tensions, and needs they identify in achieving high school completion and moving successfully into adult life, (b) counter the hegemonic discourse of disability as individual problem and reclaim the experience of disability from the perspectives of adolescent females facing multiple life challenges, and (c) create a space to illuminate the life experiences of adolescent females with disabilities in the context of general culture as a reference for making sense of their complex social realities.

### **Personal Statement**

Over the past years as a graduate student, I have had to wrestle with a fact that I had rarely found theories and models that spoke to and for me. This was especially true when I thought of adolescents with education-related disabilities living in adverse conditions. I kept struggling to situate myself in the majority of well-received, empirically supported, psychologically disciplined theories that were applied to the field of special education from a standpoint of either a unilateral deaf female, an individual with a disability, an educator, or a researcher. I might have found the symptoms of my



hearing loss in academic textbooks, but I seldom have found in those texts the meaning of disability I have made.

I took this incongruence very seriously because it led to many questions about the analytical credibility of available theories, if theories in special education were to be used as references to understand students with disabilities, their lived experiences, difficulties, concerns, everyday challenges, hopes, and needs. St. Pierre (2001), in her discussion of the involvement or even the inseparability of our own subjectivity or experiences in coming to particular theories, posed a question: “[H]ow is it that some theories/theorists are intelligible and even seductive while others are not? What makes us ready to engage or inclined to resist?” (p. 141). I knew that it was my disability consciousness that kept me thinking that those theories or models did not capture the subtleties and complexities of disability as human experience rendered in social, cultural, economic, and political contexts where disability was situated.

What does my disability consciousness do for me? I found W. E. B. DuBois’s (1903) notion of *double consciousness* to be relevant to what I mean by disability consciousness:

. . . — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 45)

Du Bois articulated the complex process of self-identity formation of African American people; he perceived the prevailing presuppositions and prejudice toward African Americans that made it difficult to reject their historically ascribed inferiority. Yet, the outer world perceived and experienced by his inner self was so real that he did not disbelieve of the existence of social injustice toward African Americans. Likewise, disability consciousness to me is a keen sense, a state of mind, and a state of affairs that makes me aware of the historical, social, and political renderings of disability. This disability consciousness constantly makes me negotiate my own selfhood as I struggle to overcome a strong sense of insecurity by claiming my capability while identifying myself with the disability I have. Yet, at the same time, I often find myself defying the hegemonic beliefs and values held in the normate<sup>1</sup> society that presuppose what it means to have a disability and live as one with a disability.

Garland-Thomson (2004), a feminist disabled scholar, also eloquently has explained that disability as a social category gives disabled people at least two lenses that may sound contradictory. This also is how I see the outer world. I have a lens that rejects a master narrative of disability experience. If someone asked me whether I was privileged to see disability from an insider's view, I surely am because I am aware of the complexity and multiplicity of disability experience; this lens would never let me define a single, bona fide meaning of living as one with a disability. Sometimes disability matters as if to reveal my everyday struggles with the outer world, but at other times disability alone does not allow me to describe my disability experience. Hernandez-Truyol (1997) described how a singular identity ascribed by the dominant legal/research paradigm to

women of color, particularly Latinas, failed to acknowledge that women of color constantly had to negotiate conflicting self identities such as gender, color, ethnicity, nationality, culture, language, and so on, in order to make sense of their multiple positions as they live in and out of the dominant culture. In Hernandez-Truyol's sensitivity to the shifting, fluid, multiple identities of women of color as well as to the local meanings of being women of color, I similarly see the conflicting nature of the experience of disability. Yet another lens also makes me aware of the existence of the social structure where individuals with disabilities are simultaneously and systematically excluded and included from the general culture on the basis of our disability status. This lens recognizes the strong social forces against those who are identified as having a disability, in turn creating a collective/social identity that let me call what I have gone through as *our* experiences.

Disability renders seemingly *unreconciled strivings* (Du Bois, 1903) that would never be visible unless they are told by those who experience them. My disability consciousness therefore instigated more struggle, especially when I thought of myself being in a field where empirical, quantitative research methods prevailed and had been employed as if they were the only means to claim what counts as disciplinary knowledge (Sasso, 2001) particularly as it continues to be emphasized in current legislation. My experiential knowledge and subjectivity as one of those who have disabilities kept telling me that the traditional research paradigm consistently omitted the personal and social significance of disability experience. Mari Matsuda (2002), a prominent critical race theorist, has illustrated the seriousness of the lack of theories that validate personal

experiences as authorized knowledge. Matsuda described a complaint made by Asian American students at Yale. Given the lack of Asian American studies program at such the prestigious university as Yale, the students asked Matsuda, “How do you ever figure out if your work is any good when none of your professors are in a position to evaluate your work because they don’t know anything about what you are trying to do?” (p. 391). As Matsuda’s students articulated to her, my concern was and has been how uncensored stories told by students with disabilities can be recognized as valid knowledge that let others know the social rendering of disability experience or what it means to be labeled and to live as one with a disability in the normative society in order to facilitate transformative and equal educational practice.

My own experiential knowledge about disability continuously assures me that the meanings and magnitude of *disability* are contextual, relational, and spatial. The experience of disability is neither stable nor fixed—unless it is in the ways in which the society treats and defines disability that makes the experience of disability stably oppressive. Yet, neither the conflicting-ridden process of identity formation of individuals who are identified as having disabilities nor their experiences under the influences of oppressive social forces have been claimed in the mainstream scholarship. Titchkosky (2003) emphasized that a better understanding about how society has created the particular structures that marginalize individuals with disabilities does not require more documentation. We just need to ask different questions through our own experiences and speak with the experience of disability authentically. This is the approach that finally speaks to and for me as a disabled female and a critical researcher. I

use my experience as a woman growing up with a disability to invite young females with disabilities whose valuable voices are indispensable to facilitate the transformation and emancipation for students who are identified as having a disability.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

St. Pierre (2001), in her discussion of a strong connectedness between theory, pedagogy, and practice, states, “Not only do people produce theory, but *theory produces people*” (p. 142, emphasis in original). How theories explain *other* is not a trivial issue for many intellectuals outside the middle-class, male, able, heterosexual, Eurocentric America because the act of theorizing traditionally carried out is inherently a racialized, gendered, and politicized practice (Britzman, 1998; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Harding, 1993; Scheurich & Young, 1997). It has kept the power of modern Eurocentric logic of domination and oppression hidden behind western Enlightenment rationality unchallenged for too long (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Wright, Weeks, & McGlaughlin, 1999). As a result, conceptual and theoretical understandings about individuals who are members of historically disenfranchised groups have been very limited within the modern, Eurocentric view of human *difference* that connotes deviance, deficiency, and inferiority both genetically and culturally (Artiles, 1998, Hayman & Levit, 2002; Kliwer & Fitzgerald, 2001; Valdes, 2002) or *Other* marked with the trait(s) of cultural, racial, or gender inferiority (Young, 2000).

The negative ramifications of the dominant deficit view in social sciences in general and in educational research in particular can be substantiated easily. For example, constantly high dropout rates among African American, Latina/o, and Native American

students; high rates of school suspensions among African American and Latino students; and asymmetric distributions of students of color and with low income in vocational, advanced placement, and special education placement indicate that various forms of educational inequalities still are evident even half a century after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954 (e.g., Berlak, 2005; Green, McIntosh, Cook-Morales, & Robinson-Zañartu, 2005; Heubert, 2003, April; Hicklin, n. d; Lipman, 2003; Jongsma & Jongsma, 2001; Obiakor & Utley, 2004; Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Under the current educational policies that require a homogenous set of assessment tools and methods to judge students' academic improvements, each student's needs and time to grow through meaningful learning process have been largely neglected. While the existing educational system and policies still fall short in preparing learning environments filled with *equality of educational opportunity* (Spring, 2002), the one-size-fits-all approach can make them feel as if they were the failures and wrongly reinforce that their failures were due to their lack of ability and efforts (Schwartzbeck, 2003, December; Townsend, 2002).

In the eyes of the intellectual *Other*, the grave misunderstandings, distortions, and omissions in the dominant scholarship of oppressive social conditions in schools that significantly affect the academic performance, opportunity structure, and overall educational experience of female and male students of color and those from lower class are not negligible. Although the traditional research paradigm grounded on the modern Eurocentric belief system does not acknowledge any biases or values attached to human judgment in its knowledge claim, the disadvantageous conditions continually facing

students at the margins indicate the institutional discrimination against students of historically disenfranchised groups, and therefore it requires social inquiry and political action to uncover and combat the systems of social oppression in education (Ladson-Billings, 2003; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Researchers who situate themselves within critical frameworks now raise questions about the ways in which the traditional research paradigm has conceptualized and theorized school failure and student problems and sanctioned students for problems on the basis of value-neutral ideological justification (Berlak, 2005; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Daiute & Fine, 2003; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Watts & Erevellas, 2004). They argue that the dominant research paradigm has failed to interrogate how the hegemonic cultural concepts of ability and normalcy have profoundly affected the manner in which students at the margins are objectified, reduced to problems, and targeted for normalization (Ginwright, 2000; Hayman & Levit, 2002; Kilgore & Bloom, 2002; Kincheloe, 1999; Parker & Lynn, 2002).

### **The Invisibility of the Experience of Disability**

Under the discursive school practices where the Eurocentric deficit view is promulgated, students who are identified as having a disability are particularly vulnerable to multiple forms of social oppression. As a number of minority intellectuals have contended, in the existing educational environments many students outside the dominant cultural group must survive and achieve academic and vocational successes, while they constantly deal with oppressive social, cultural, economic, and political conditions. In order to overcome the social and cultural hurdles, these students necessarily may have to



shift and negotiate their social identities and strategize their behaviors as they cross boundaries between the dominant and their own home or subcultures (Delgado Bernal, 2002; González, 2001; Fernández, 2002).

Given that disproportionate numbers of students with disabilities consist of racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities, many students who are identified as having a disability also have had to negotiate the tensionality of their conflicting social identities, evaluate their opportunity structure, and act on their own behalf (Asch, 2004; Bauer, 2001; Biklen, 2000; Fleischer, 2001; Smith, 2001). Thus, for many students who are identified as having a disability, disableism is not the only social barrier that excludes them from the full participation in an equal, just education. They constantly and simultaneously but differently are facing various forms of social oppression such as racism, sexism, classism, and ageism. In spite of the multiple disadvantageous conditions that students with disabilities likely have to deal with, their unjustified struggles barely have been visible in the mainstream educational scholarship (Erevelles, 2005).

Scholars who have challenged the traditional medical approach to disability have observed that students who are identified as having a disability have been suffering from a poverty of theory, making the experience of disability invisible (Biklen, 2000; Erevelles, 2005, 2002). Seemingly, such arguments can be easily discounted, since in study after study, researchers, especially special education researchers, have been dealing with a wide range of disabilities identified in students who show difficulties in school learning. It even may appear that students with disabilities are overly exposed. Additionally, some special education researchers recently have begun addressing the

need of gender-, race- or ethnic-specific programs in identification and assessment practices (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005; Oswald et al., 2003; Quinn, Poirier, & Garfinkel, 2005). This shift in the foci of research appears to respond to the issue of the disproportionate representation and to fulfill the void of special education research areas in terms of demographic variability. What then does the invisibility and silence of students with disabilities actually mean?

A classic example of the contextual meaning of the invisibility of students or more broadly people with disabilities in the context of general culture is located in Bogdan and Taylor's (1976) work. They illustrated the poorly illuminated insider's view of disability in the context of a person who was labeled as mentally retarded. Ed, a 26 year-old man commented, as he shared his life history with these researchers:

You have an image of yourself deep down. You try to sort it all out. You know what you are deep inside but those around you give you a negative picture of yourself. It's that umbrella over you . . . Some people think that you can tell if a person is retarded by looking at them. If you think that way you don't give people the benefit of the doubt. You judge a person by how they look or how they talk or what the tests show, but you can never really tell what is inside the person. (p. 51)

As Ed articulated, it is the sense of contradiction, equanimity, and, concurrently resistance to the normative gaze of disability which I conceptualize as an example of the experience of disability. The experience of disability is invisible when people with disabilities are given neither a voice nor opportunities to share how they make sense of their own experience of being so judged or labeled. The invisibility of disability is situated in contexts where people with disabilities are not given authority to resist the master scripts of disability imposed on them.

More recently, Erevelles (2005), among other scholars, also has elaborated the invisibility of disability, using an analogy from Ralph Ellison's (1952) work, *Invisible Man*. Erevelles emphasizes that the invisibility of disability does not mean that non-disabled people do not notice people with disabilities. Rather, it is opposite. People with disabilities often are *hyper-visible* (Erevelles, 2005). Nonetheless, people with disabilities continue to be invisible because, as Ellison (1952) portrayed in an African American man's search for a context in which to be true to himself and to be truly known by others, "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me . . . When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me" (Ellison, 1952, p. 3).

The juxtaposition of the invisibility in these two different contexts--the context of race and that of disability--portrays how persistent the societal intolerance to human differences outside the *conceptual geography of normalization* has been (Britzman, 1998). In the context of disability, people with disabilities remain invisible as long as non-disabled people attempt to understand and evaluate them only through their imaginations and assumptions about a life with a disability or a living while being perceived as *object* (Erevelles, 2005), whether or not they are conscious about their own normative gaze toward Other. In many instances, non-disabled people may have come across people with disabilities only to evaluate themselves or their own normalness as they project their own value and belief system about disability or human difference onto the bodies of people with disabilities, while not being conscious about the cultural privilege given to their able bodies (Erevelles, 2005; Garland-Thomson, 2004).

The juxtaposition of the invisibility in these two contexts also highlights that people at margins likely may find or experience their own differences in relation to others as they are put in a position of being objectified and judged as different by the normate standards. They likely learn how their otherness is stereotyped and discriminated by reading the master narratives of the normate (Biklen, 2000; Britzman, 1998). This suggests that *experiencing* Otherness quintessentially is a social phenomenon and is not due to the difference in itself which people at margins manifest in their bodies. Then, to make the Othering experience visible is to understand the context where Otherness is situated and conceptualized in particular ways so as to legitimate social exclusion of people at the margins. To understand the experience of Otherness is to unmask the hidden ideology that arranges the context where people find themselves being perceived and categorized as Other.

The contextual similarity of the invisibility between disability and race, which Erevelles (2005) demonstrates, also implies that in the normate society the experience of disability may have intersected with other dimensions of social identities such as race, gender, social class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Through what differences do people at multiple margins find their invisibility in schools, in the community, or in everyday life? Do they experience the invisibility ubiquitously, and if so, what is it that makes their invisibility an all too familiar experience? The contextual similarity further can imply that by focusing on and fighting over a single dimension of one's invisibility, say disability, one may have to give up other dimensions of invisibility that are being experienced simultaneously. This indicates that attempting to theorize the experience of

disability, while ignoring the intersections of race, gender, and social class with disability, may result not only in falsely representing the experience of persons with disabilities but also in producing greater obstacles to the understanding of the experience of disability as a complex social phenomenon.

### **Problematizing Invisibilities of Female Students with Disabilities**

Ironically, once students are identified as having a disability, the medical gaze of experts essentializes disability as if disability is their master status, definite identity, or the nature of their being (Barnes & Mercer, 2003; Morris, 1991). This isolates the experiences of students with disabilities from the context of general culture and obscures other dimensions of their everyday experiences including, but not limited to, gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. The medical gaze also imputes a range of imperfections (Bogdan & Taylor, 1976) to students who are identified as having a disability: inability to control, reason, express, be independent, and be coherent, to name a few (Biklen, 2000; Erevellas, 2002; Hayman & Levit, 2002). The identification of having a disability thus subjugates the experiential knowledge and voices of students who are so labeled. This justifies placing students with disabilities in a disadvantageous social and cultural position where they are rarely conceptualized as *builders and holders of knowledge* (Delgado Bernal, 2002) who are aware of social injustice hindering their pathways to well-being and success in schools and other social contexts. As a result, multiple layers of social oppression confront many students who are identified as having a disability and they are not adequately addressed in the dominant educational scholarship. In the name of science, the meanings of disability which students themselves

give to their everyday experience have remained unheard and unauthorized (Biklen, 2000; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Fine & Asch, 1988a).

Why does the invisibility of disability experience matter in the context of female students with disabilities? Very critically, by definition, the invisibility of disability occurs because the dominant discourse has decontextualized the experience of disability and confined persons who are so identified in an isolated, fixed, and one-sided hegemonic concept of disability (Garland-Thomson, 2004). This means that while the hegemonic concept of disability continues to signify one's intellectual inferiority and cultural deficiency, the authenticity and substance of what it means to be categorized and to live as one with a disability in the normate society remain unclaimed (Erevelles, 2002; Fine & Asch, 1988a; Garland-Thomson, 2004).

Additionally and importantly, unlike racial or ethnic minority students who likely are to find people who are like them in immediate environments such as at home or in the community, students with disabilities in general have fewer opportunities to find others who can share the social, cultural, and historical rendering of the experience of disability (Bauer, 2001; Morris, 1991; Titchkosky, 2003). This means that they do not have enough resources, opportunities, or testimonials from others that helps them reflect, question, challenge, and make sense of the meanings they give to their own experiences of being stereotyped, marginalized, and excluded (Charlton, 1998; Biklen, 2000; Titchkosky, 2003). Needless to say, engaging in dialectical conversations with one's inner selves and with others is essential for one to empower oneself "to take control of their own destinies" (Williams & McKenna, 2002, p. 172). The lack of enough references that help

them make sense of their everyday struggles indicates that many students with disabilities are deprived of the power to value their own selfhood, perspectives, unique experiences, and needs, regardless of their disability status, race, ethnicity, gender, or social class (Asch, 2004; Biklen, 2000; Charlton, 1998).

The negative ramifications of the lack of such references are even more serious for female students with disabilities who are involved in the juvenile justice system. That is, within the dominant deficit view, their commonly found social/institutional identities such as gender (female), race or ethnicity (minority status), social class (lower class or poverty), delinquent status, in addition to their disability status, are stamped with an *essence* (Young, 2000) of inferiority (Solorzano, 1997; Stuart van Wormer & Bartollas, 2000; Garland-Thomson, 2004; Young, 2000). That is, being signified with multiple inferior markers, these young females who are conceptualized and theorized so have been objectified as the target for normalization, while the taken-for-granted, hegemonic assumptions about the multiple inferiorities of these young females hardly have been questioned. Consequently, academic or cultural references currently available to these young females may only have helped to naturalize their unjustified everyday struggles and internalize their inferiorities in either context of gender, race, ethnicity, class, delinquency, or disability. By providing references that are irrelevant to or are disconnected from the social realities of these young females, the act of theorizing in itself has contributed to the reproduction of the multiple systems of social oppression.

It then becomes a question of whether to continue reproducing and using the same references that keep oppressing these young females or to create new ones so as to

prepare safe and sound educational environments where their situated perspectives and voices are authenticated and valued. If a role of theory in education is to make sense of students' educational experiences in order to evaluate and improve the quality of services, devoting ears to students speaking for themselves is, without a doubt, essential. Carspecken and Apple (1992), critical educational ethnographers, emphasized that "to think seriously about education, like culture in general, is also to think just as seriously about power, about the mechanisms through which certain groups assert their visions, beliefs, and practices" (p. 509). For students with disabilities, particularly female students with disabilities who are involved in the juvenile justice system, who wrongly have been stamped with multiple markers of inferiority and treated accordingly for too long, liberating them from the gaze of the traditional deficit view and politicizing their invisibility is a necessary step to transform for educational equality and social justice. This is why and where the counterhegemonic discourse of disability begins.

### **Research Questions**

1. What does it mean to be a young female with a disability?
2. To what extent do adolescent females with disabilities who are involved in the juvenile justice system consider disability as part of their identities? To what extent do they attribute their life challenges to their disability?
3. In what ways do disability and the intersecting social categories, gender, race, ethnicity, and social class contribute to adolescent females' perceived constraints or strengths in achieving academic and vocational success?



4. As the consumers of special education services, how and when do these young females evaluate the service provided to them as beneficial or detrimental in achieving their self-identified goals?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The experience of race is complex. So is the experience of disability. Disability, like race, becomes a lens to see and understand how and why people with disabilities are simultaneously included and excluded from the normate society (Barnes, 1990; Garland-Thomson, 2005; 1997; Titchkosky, 2003). The *personal is political*, say feminists, and so do disabled intellectuals. They emphasize the significance of personal experience in theorizing because knowledge is always situated in particular sociocultural contexts where people are positioned. Disabled intellectuals make the experience and sociocultural meanings of being labeled disabled visible in the ableist society (Garland-Thomson, 2004; Morris, 1991; Titchkosky, 2003; 2001a; Thomas, 1999).

### **Introduction to Emancipatory Disability Research**

After a long history of silence of individuals with disabilities in scholarship, a small but growing body of disabled intellectuals and activists has begun claiming a necessity to theorize disability in its own right. Rather applying the label of ‘individuals with disabilities,’ disabled intellectuals call themselves *disabled*, signifying their theoretical, historical, and political positionality to identify that the experience of disability is a quintessentially social phenomenon. Disabled intellectuals assert that it is social barriers that disable individuals with particular conditions, restrict their participation in social activities, and undermine their psychological and emotional well-

being (Barnes & Mercer, 2003; Thomas, 1999). Thomas (1999) summarizes, “Disability is about both barriers to doing and barriers to being” (p. 60).

The coming out of disabled intellectuals in scholarship has created a new field of inquiry, generally called disability studies, which emerged in Britain during the 1970s. Since then, disability studies has generated radical and then sophisticated approaches to theorizing disability in order to break the silence and silencing of people with disabilities and challenge the traditional medical approach that conceptualizes disability as functional abnormality or personal tragedy. Disability studies scholars challenge the medical approach and reconceptualize disability as a social, ethical, and political construct akin to race or gender. In so doing, they retell the experience of disability from the insiders’ perspectives, analyze disability as a system of exclusion, expose and combat oppressive social conditions against people with disabilities, and engage in social justice through collective action (Barnes, Oliver, & Barton, 2002; Barnes, Mercer, & Shakespeare, 1999; Mercer, 2002).

The proliferation of disability studies today is much indebted to the advancement of critical approaches to social sciences in general and educational research in particular, including but not limited to critical race theory, feminist theories, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. A common theoretical agenda among these approaches is to dismantle hidden assumptions of the Europatriarchal ideological hegemony that has produced a system of knowing and that rationalizes whose knowledge dictates reality (e.g., Kinchloe & McLaren, 2003; 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Harden, 1993; Mertens, 2005; Roman, 1992). In return, disability studies now offer unique ways of evaluating the

systems of social exclusion and the experience of *Otherness* through the lens of disability (Asch, 2004; Erevelles, 2005; Garland-Thomson, 2005, 2004).

***The Traditional Approach to Disability—Medical Model***

Disability studies stands firm in resisting the traditional medical approach. The medical or personal tragedy approach presupposes that medical knowledge is the solution to the problem of individuals with disabilities (Finkelstein, 1993a). The medical approach has been widely accepted by experts and allied professionals as the principles through which to understand the experience of disability (Barnes, et al., 1999; Finkelstein, 1993a). It thus has produced false universalism that defines disabled individuals' abnormality, deficiency, or functional limitation as the only meaning to disability. Normalization thus became an attitude taken toward people with disabilities (Hughes, 2002).

The prevailing hegemonic understanding and interpretation of disability not only naturalizes and depoliticizes the historical, economic, ethical, and political struggles of people with disabilities, but it also has created and reinforced stereotypical images of people with disabilities as invalid, irrational, dependent, immoral individuals who are incapable of becoming productive citizens (Barnes et al., 1999; Erevelles, 2002; Fine & Asch, 1988a). The false universalism further effectively has eclipsed how other forms of social divisions, such as race, gender, and social class, make it difficult for individuals of color with disabilities and women with disabilities to articulate how the intersecting forms of gender, racial, and class oppression exacerbate their already oppressive social condition (Barnes & Mercer, 2003; Bryan, 1996). For example, Asch and Fine (1988)

noted that historically, women with disabilities had been perceived as a social burden. Their physically limited bodies connoted emotional, economic, and sexual limitation that betrayed traditional and stereotypical feminine traits and images of attractiveness and nurturance as wife, mother or sexual partner (Asch, 2001; Fine & Asch, 1988b; Garland-Thomson, 2004; Hanna & Rogovsky, 1991). Because of the imputed limitations, women with disabilities often were perceived as lacking femininity and so were perceived as asexual despite the fact many women with disabilities were at greater risks for victimization of sexual abuse (Fine & Asch, 1988b; Monahan & Lurie, 2003; Nosek, Foley, Hughes, & Howland, 2001; Zaviršek, 2002).

Inevitably, the medical model has established a hierarchical relationship between experts/researchers (the knower) and individuals with disabilities (the known, to be known) where the knower, who is equipped with ever-refined techniques for diagnosis and labeling, objectifies individuals with impairments and defines what needs individuals with disabilities have and what the solutions to the problem are (Barnes & Mercer, 2003; Danforth, 1997; Flinkelstein, 1993b). To that end, the fate of individuals with disabilities is in the hands of experts (Danforth, 1997). Whereas medical experts and allied professionals under the discursive framework have gained and maintained their power to control the lives of individuals with disabilities, individuals with disabilities are reduced to problems and passive recipients of public assistance who hardly can remove medical labels and the negative social and cultural images attached to those labels (Danforth, 2000; Finkelstein, 1993a; Shakespeare, 1994).

Barnes and his colleagues (1999) reviewed the history of the concept of disability and found that no concept of disability was universal. Rather, the concept of disability was historically and geographically specific. Other works on historical and comparative reviews of disability by Kliewer and Fitzgerald (2001) and Hayman and Levit (2002) made similar arguments. With the use of critical race theory and postcolonialism as frameworks, these works juxtaposed the historical development of the concept of race and disability to demonstrate that both disability and race were socially constructed concepts.

For instance, Kliewer and Fitzgerald (2001) explained that the notions of disability and race emerged as colonizers or Subject (e.g., the historically privileged: White, middle class, abled, heterosexual, male) began seeking rational forms of social organization. Originally, race was not the color of one's skin but "a convenient *template of segmentation*" (p. 454) that gave Western European colonizers the power to validate their right to devalue and control other groups. As the privileged Europeans gradually developed scientific rationality, scientific knowledge was used to detect deficiencies in non-privileged individuals and groups. Any traits that were deviant from the European ideal, such as skin color and cultural or intellectual development, were naturalized and considered inferior forms of human beings. The social construct, *race*, confirmed that deficiencies in non-privileged individuals and groups were biologically and culturally true (Kliewer & Fitzgerald, 2001). Not surprisingly, the socially constructed concept of inferior races or individuals produced power hierarchies where the privileged had right to

define the problems of the inferior races and inferior individuals and determine solution to those problems (Kliewer & Fitzgerald, 2001; Hayman & Levit, 2002).

This social construct thesis clashes with the medical model of disability that considers the nature and condition of disability as *truth* and *universal* across any social and cultural contexts. Yet, Subject ruled *Other*. Defectiveness found in inferior others was essentialized, and then was used as a rationale for the normalization of people with disabilities, which further naturalized and justified devaluation, isolation, segregation, and remediation of inferior Others in social institutions, including schools (Hayman & Levit, 2002; Kliewer & Fitzgerald, 2001). Sadly, historical reviews of the social treatment of people with disabilities as sick or defective, including those who had visual, hearing, communication and intellectual impairments, found that those sick people likely were isolated, institutionalized, or incarcerated, and often were linked to moral, sexual, and criminal deviance and often were considered a burden or threat to the society. Therefore, incarceration was, in fact, considered helpful for both the defectives and the society (Barnes et al., 1999; Knupfer, 2001).

### ***Reconceptualization of Disability as a Social Phenomenon***

The radical conceptual shift toward socio-political theories of disability is rooted in the grave discrepancies between supposedly objective and detached non-disabled researchers and people with disabilities regarding how disability was experienced under what conditions (e.g., Hunt, 1981; Morris, 1991; Oliver, 1992; Shakespeare, 1996). It also stemmed from disabled intellectuals' profound dissatisfactions with the dominant research approach that created a colonized relationship where non-disabled researchers

overpowered and controlled the perspectives, voices, and lived experiences of research subjects with disabilities. Paul Hunt (1981), in his influential work, *Settling accounts with the parasite people: A critique of "A life apart" by E. J. Miller and G. V. Gwynne*, exemplified a research study done by non-disabled researchers who left their research sites in the end of the study only to make their research subjects with disabilities feel exploited.

Hunt was a leading disabled activist in the early years of the disability movement in Britain and a resident of a segregated institution for people with physical disabilities. According to Hunt, two researchers, Miller and Gwynne, began a research project at some residential institutions at the request by several residents of those institutions, including Hunt himself. Hunt and other residents had been struggling for greater autonomy and control that would give them more independence and responsibility. Among the barriers being identified by Hunt and the residents in their struggles was the deep-rooted stigma toward people with disabilities and the existing socio-political conditions that continued to deny access and opportunities to make independent choices, control over their personal lives in their residences, and to be actively involved in community activities. The residents' request to external researchers, such as Miller and Gwynne, who were "experts" in group dynamics, therefore, was based on their interest and hope that the research findings would properly assess disabling social barriers impeding them from the full social participation and that Miller and Gwynne would support their campaign.

However, the research findings, later published with the title *A Life Apart* (1972), were quite the reverse. A conclusion that Miller and Gwynne drew from the interviews and observations with the resident subjects who trusted them was that demands for greater autonomy were not viable. Miller and Gwynne observed that being institutionalized was synonymous to *social death*, and yet they attributed the primary cause of the social death sentence to the residents' irreversible impairments. This understanding made them conclude that the "essential task to be carried out is to help the inmates to make their transition from social death to physical death" (Miller & Gwynne, 1972. p. 15; cited in Hunt, 1981, p. 42) and to accept the social death sentence.

Eventually, Miller and Gwynne came to be well known for this work and *A Life Apart* became one of the texts for a training course in a university, notwithstanding the fact that it failed to objectively analyze and expose the oppressive forces in and outside the institutions that kept immobilizing the capability and potentials of people with disabilities. Hunt condemned Miller and Gwynne, calling them "parasite people" who not only acted against the interest of their research subjects but also took advantage of the research opportunity for their own professional and academic gains. He criticized that while the researchers admitted that their emotional involvements with their research subjects made it very difficult to maintain their objective, detached stance as researchers, their preoccupation of keeping detached stance with their subjects made them unable to objectively scrutinize their own biases and the power relations involved in their research activities, which in turn affected their conclusions and recommendations. Nor did they neutrally assess the social and material conditions from the perspective of their research



subjects. As a result, their research products not only disempowered the residents but they also further perpetuated the depressing and powerless images of people with disabilities being institutionalized by erroneously concluding that the ill-fated living conditions of people with disabilities were inevitable, natural consequences of having impairments.

As illustrated in Hunt's critique, having been misunderstood, betrayed, alienated, and damaged by the work of non-disabled researchers, people with disabilities have come to realize that they have suffered for too long from the built-in assumptions of human differences embedded in the dominant approach to knowledge construction. They also have found that traditional research hardly has improved their social, material, and political conditions (Bryan, 1996; Oliver, 1996). Ultimately, seeking alternative approaches that could challenge the hegemonic views and attitudes toward people with disabilities was a natural response to and plausible way to break colonized relationships and to counter the dominant assumption of disability experience (Barnes et al., 1999; Longmore, 2003).

Negative experiences with dominant researchers, however, are not unique to individuals with disabilities as research subjects. For example, Hermes (1999) described how Native American people had been colonized by non-Native researchers. When studies on Native American people were carried out through the framework of the dominant/positivist research paradigm, neither respect nor reciprocity was given to Native subjects, their voices, their cultural heritage, and their community. Hermes articulated a notion of ethics in research for the Native American community that

gradually rose to combat the colonized relationship and reframe research on Native Americans as one that must serve for the benefits for Native people and their community. Likewise, disabled intellectuals now assert that the understanding of disability experience must come from an insider's view. The academic and political significance of research on disability lies in a deep caring and responsibility for the transformation and empowerment of individuals with disabilities and their community (O'Toole, 2004). They no longer let non-disabled researchers "voice over" the experience of disability (Titchkosky, 2003).

### **Emancipatory Disability Research as a Conceptual Framework**

The concept of emancipatory disability research thus has emerged out of the necessity to demystify the hegemonic ideological structure and contextualize the historical struggles of disabled individuals (Mercer, 2002; Oliver, 1992; O'Toole, 2004). This approach situates itself within a critical framework that focuses on self-reflective inquiries into the social construction of human experience (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1999; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003, 1994). Emancipatory disability research also embodies an essence of *critical* work, that is, political action for the empowerment of individuals who are historically marginalized through research (Garland-Thomson, 2005; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003, 1994; Mertens, 2005). Unlike traditional positivist researchers who assume a neutral, objective stance throughout the course of their research, critical researchers unapologetically (Ladson-Billings, 2003) declare and conceptualize their consciousness and involvement into research as a form of action for social justice (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 2003; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994).

Emancipatory disability research also regards itself as a partisan research and rejects the master script of neutral researchers who are “definitely not on our side” (Hunt, 1981, p. 39).

Oliver (1992), one of the leading disabled scholars, set the stage early on for this trend by delineating a conceptual framework of the emancipatory disability research paradigm. He elaborated several features that embodied the essence of emancipatory disability research. These features included *reciprocity*, *gain*, and *empowerment*. According to Oliver, reciprocity and gain emerge in conditions or situations where the researcher encourages the research subjects to engage in self-reflection and develop a deeper understanding of the context being researched, which further leads to the research subjects’ awareness of the need for social transformation. Reciprocity and gain, though indispensable, are not enough to achieve the goal of emancipatory disability research. A serious question Oliver posed was whether research on people with disabilities would continue being carried out in ways that would only serve the interests and needs of non-disabled professionals in pursuing their expertise while it would continue making people with disabilities feel exploited and oppressed. Oliver emphasized that in order for the researcher to make research beneficial to the lives of people with disabilities and empower them, the issue for emancipatory disability research was “not how to empower people but once people have decided to empower themselves, precisely what research can then do to facilitate this process” (p. 111).

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) determinedly emphasized that the transformation and emancipation of individuals who were historically oppressed must

begin with their own critical awareness or consciousness about oppressive social forces that kept oppressing them, dehumanizing them, and making them feel fearful of liberation. With the use of a concept of *conscientização* defined as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradiction, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35), Freire stressed that transformation of the oppressed would take place only when they realized their own oppressive conditions and accept the struggle for their liberation and humanization. The concept of *conscientização* is embodied in the emancipatory disability research framework: The process of emancipation through research must entail the researcher’s greater understanding of the context where disability is situated and the lived experiences to which people with disabilities give meaning through dialectics, and importantly, such process must not be mistaken as helping disabled people understand themselves better (Oliver, 1992).

With regard to the specificity of research agenda of emancipatory disability research, Oliver (1992) tailored Bourne’s (1981) idea about an alternative research paradigm that aimed to combat racism that had been entrenched in both individualistic consciousness and institutional practices. In his original work, Bourne emphasized the needs to make black experience visible in mainstream scholarship, to redefine the problem, and to challenge the dominant research paradigm. Oliver added several features to these in order to combat disableism. These features included (a) “the development of a methodology and set of techniques commensurate with the emancipatory research paradigm”; (b) “a description of collective experience in the face of academics who are unaware or ignore the existence of the disability movement”; (c) “a monitoring and

evaluation of services that are established, controlled and operated by disabled people themselves” (p.112).

The paradigmatic shift emphasized in the emancipatory framework has significant implications in reframing educational research and practice, particularly in the field of special education. That is, emancipatory disability research requires critical reexaminations of the definition of *problem*, or in other words, the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological assumptions in the dominant educational discourses on the nature of, causes of, and solutions to disability and school-related problems often attributed to students and not to theories that identify students as problems.

It also is important to emphasize that social oppression and discriminatory practices are not always carried out intentionally (Pincus, 2000; Young, 2000). Ignorance or even innocence about the power given to one’s frames of reference that can subordinate the voices and perspectives of individuals who are put in lower positions of social hierarchies can be thus a form of social oppression (Britzman, 1998; Pincus, 2000; Young, 2000). Unmasking the hidden ideology thus is crucial for those who historically are privileged as well, for if they remain ignorant or innocent about what social, cultural, and political messages the dominant ideology transmits, their actions, though well-intended, may function to continue oppressing those whom they have wished to help.

Before the discussion of theoretical frameworks that follows, it is first necessary to substantiate the contextual meaning of *social construct* that I bring to bear in the current study, using Hacking’s discussion of social construction work. Hacking (1999), in

his discussion of conditions and significance of social construction work, proposed that an idea that is inhabited in a social setting can produce a particular kind of person by classifying the person with the idea. For example, *women refugees* is a social construct. For social constructionists, however, focusing on the meaning of “women refugees” itself as a social construct is not the focal point of their analysis. It is the context about which they are critical. Specifically, social construction work operates its analysis on the basis of a precondition for theses about X: (0) “In the present state of affairs, X is taken for granted; X appears to be inevitable.” (p. 12). This precondition is followed by three theses, including (1) “X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable”; (2) “X is quite bad as it is”; and (3) “We would be much better off if X were done away with, or at least radically transformed.” (p. 6).

Given that it is obvious that this world would be a better place if no women had to escape from their own countries, argues Hacking, what is the point that social construction work is making? A woman may need to be classified as a woman refugee so that she can escape from unbearable conditions and stay in another country. The *idea* of women refugees thus holds a matrix that influences material environments such as advocates, lawyers, court houses, passports, and so on. Then, what the woman who escaped her country needs to do is to learn how to live her life as a woman refugee. What the woman who is so classified experiences is the experience of a woman refugee that is shaped by the idea or concept of women refugees and the classification of it, which also arranges particular material environments that ratify the idea. However, once the woman as

women refugees is surrounded by the particular material environments, the idea or concept of women refugees, which originally was socially constructed, gradually becomes a taken-for-granted fact as if to personify the woman; as if her experience as women refugees was inevitable, the nature of things, or the nature of the woman.

Importantly, within this process, how the meaning that the woman refugee gives to her everyday experience is irrelevant to the ideological concept of women refugees.

Therefore, her subjective experience of being so labeled and of living with it can be set aside and dismissed. Once this schema is established, she may have difficulty transforming her experience unless the idea of a woman refugee and the matrix attached to it are altered. In order for the woman to transform her experience and the imputed social identity, changing the classification is not enough. Exposing the hidden ideology and its power that has created the concept of the woman refugee is necessary.

Hacking's example demonstrates that what social construction work fundamentally does is raising consciousness. One agenda is to unmask ideology that inhibits in a particular context: In what social settings does the idea of women refugees exist? What relations exist between those who invent the particular *kind* of women--women refugees--and those who are so classified? While the idea of women refugees appears inevitable as if classifying so were *a result of social events* (Hacking, 1999) and as if the experience of women refugees were the nature of her being, how has the concept of women refugees and its classification caused her to have particular social and material consequences? To raise consciousness is to question the discursive bodies of knowledge and the unidirectional relations between those who classify and those who are classified.

Thus to raise consciousness is to “change how we see those relations” (Hacking, 1999, p. 6).

In summary, using the emancipatory disability research paradigm as a backbone of my counter-hegemonic approach to understanding of the experience of disability, I have shifted this study from one that is neutral and objective to one that is praxis-oriented. In the next sections, I will discuss theoretical frameworks I used in this study in order to substantiate multiple social, cultural, and political roles assigned to disability and how the sociocultural rendering of disability intersects with other social categories and continues to marginalize the experience and voices of female students who are identified as having disabilities from research and thus from theory. The six components delineated in the agenda of emancipatory disability research, as noted earlier in this section, are infused in the following theoretical frameworks and are embodied throughout the course of the study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Feminist Disability Theory**

Within disability studies, various theoretical approaches or genres analyze the experience of disability. One of those theoretical approaches is *Feminist Disability Theory*. Early disability studies primarily took a pragmatic approach, generally called the *social model*, which steadfastly confronted the prevailing medical approach (Barnes & Mercer, 2003). The social model redefined disability by distinguishing *impairment* as subjective or personal experience in the body from *disability* as the outcomes of social barriers and power relation, or social oppression, emphasizing that disability was socially



constructed (Barnes & Mercer, 2003; Hughes, 2002; Thomas, 1999). The social model made considerable contributions in addressing social, material, and economic disadvantageous conditions experienced by people with disabilities, such as unemployment, which significantly and continually limited the power to transform and control their daily lives.

However, for other groups of disabled scholars, feminist disabled scholars in particular, the social model's exclusive analysis of the social structure and social barriers is a necessary but still inadequate approach to understanding disability as a significant aspect of human experience to which individuals with disabilities give meaning (Garland-Thomson, 2004; Hughes, 2002; Thomas, 1999; Titchkosky, 2001a). These scholars believe that the social model approach that differentiated impairment from disability took a significant risk to keep the prevailing view of functional abnormality within the individual intact, resulting in obscuring the existence and effects of the sociocultural rendering of disability that continues to discriminate against people who have impairments (Hughes, 2002; Titchkosky, 2001b). This approach also has failed to unearth the complex processes of conflict-ridden identity formation of people with disabilities as they constantly are compared and evaluated by the aesthetic images and standards held by the normate society (Garland-Thomson, 2004; Thomas, 1999; Titchkosky, 2001a).

An example of the ramifications of conceptual separation of physical impairments from disability is illustrated in some disabled intellectuals' arguments about *people-first language*. For instance, Titchkosky (2001b), one of the leading disability studies scholars, contended that although people-first language originated in the desire of

disabled people to reject the prevailing images of disability as the master status, the separation of disability from the person resulted in enforcing the medicalization of disability, the objectification of impaired conditions within the body, and the legitimization of targeting people with impairments for normalization. She also observed that the people-first language philosophy did not transform the social and cultural rendering of disability. It depoliticized, dehistoricized, and decontextualized people's everyday struggles with biases, prejudices, or negative images attached to disability. The dilemma resulting from the conflicting concept of normalization of people with disabilities also is portrayed in Chow's (2001) description of how Asian immigrants must strive for the dominant notion of cultural normalization by downplaying one's Asianness. Chow found Rod Michalko's (2000) personal reflection of persons-first language philosophy as an analogy of the experience of cultural marginality:

“Persons-first” language presents the argument of sameness in the name of personhood - that is we are all persons and therefore we are all entitled to the same rights. The problem with a “person-first” approach for disability culture, Michalko argues, is that it obliterates the identities of people with disabilities by avoiding and subsuming differences. Simultaneously, a “persons-first” approach creates a situation whereby people with disabilities are pressured to show just how nondisabled they are - just how well they fit into the Western notion of personhood- in order to lay claim to rights. (p. 112)

The juxtaposition of Chow's own conflicting self-identity process with Michalko's personal experience as one with a disability seems to be revealing; being different is symbolized in the dominant culture as if to be the subject to cultural scrutiny and punishment. Yet, the conceptual separation of disability from the individual obscures

such conflicting negotiation and renegotiation of selfhood in the everyday life of people with disabilities.

Chow's portrayal of the experience of cultural marginality also can illuminate the extent to which the normative cultural value system has significant influences on one's process of self-identification with disability or other social categories. That is, if it was the mere appearance or visibility of disability that matters in the process of conflict-ridden identity formation of many individuals with disabilities, those whose *impairments* are indiscernible to others could have escaped from, at least, the cultural scrutiny by passing, that is, not disclosing their disabilities. However, those who have invisible impairments are not guaranteed to be exempted or precluded from receiving a *cultural sentence* (Garland-Thomson, 2004) for having a disability: People with disabilities, whether visible or invisible, are likely to be aware of how they are judged in the normative society. They have learned how being labeled as having a disability alone can be a target for discrimination, degradation, and patronization by watching and reading social and cultural representations of disability in texts, signs, images, and narratives in everyday life contexts. As Titchkosky (2001b) and Chow (2001) highlighted, the "persons-first" approach may have deprived many individuals with disabilities of a historical grounding that allows them to critically examine and make sense of why we as ones with a disability must struggle to the extent that the experience of disability is not understood as a significant aspect of everyday human experience that is socially and politically constructed.

In addition to the dilemma of persons-first language versus disability consciousness, the early social model overlooked the power relations among people with disabilities as a social class. As has been seen in many rights and political movements in the past, those who claimed to represent the interests of all individuals with disabilities were white men with physical impairments. Their viewpoint and goals in political actions were regarded as if to represent all of the experience of individuals with disabilities. The Euro-patriarchal value systems within the group tended to exclude the histories, experiences, consciousness, and voices of minority Others within the group such as women with disabilities and people of color with disabilities (Barnes et al., 1999; Morris, 1991; O'Toole, 2004). Given the perceived inadequacies in the early social model of disability, feminist disabled scholars take different analytic lenses and aim to politicize everyday struggles of people with disabilities.

### ***Disability as a Form and Means of Social Oppression***

Feminist scholars, in spite of their differences in definitions of and the causes of women's oppression, aim to analyze how women's subordination and marginalization came to be (e.g., Flax, 1993; Ollenburger & Moore, 1998; Thomas, 1999). Commitment to social change through feminism is to hold a sense of responsibility and accountability for women's issues (Hase, 2002) and a commitment to actions (Flax, 1993). Likewise, feminist disabled scholars challenge the patriarchal beliefs that assign particular attributes to femaleness as physical and mental inferiority or deficiency and to disability as "a flaw, lack, or excess" (Garland-Thomson, 2005, p. 1557). Feminist disabled scholars also steadfastly reject the dominant assumptions of what it means to live with a disability and

reimagine disability in order to empower women with disabilities for their own transformation (Garland-Thomson, 2005; Morris, 1991).

Feminist disabled theorists therefore particularly problematize the invisibility and silence of people with disabilities, specifically, women with disabilities in the mainstream scholarship (e.g., Asch, 2004; Fine & Asch, 1988b; Morris, 1991; Rousso, 2001; Thomas, 1999), or in the “malestream” scholarship, as Cornel West (1993) called it. For example, in Morris’s early work, *Pride against Prejudice: Transforming Attitudes to Disability* (1991), she made a strong assertion that the voice, cultural representations, and subjective experiences of women with disabilities in the context of general culture needed to be heard and visible for a number of critical reasons. First, the omission of the experience of disability in the context of general culture where disability is situated means that people with disabilities do not have enough references that help them make sense of their intricate everyday life experiences. Second, the omission of the experiences of women with disabilities living in the general culture means that non-disabled people have few references to understand what it means to live as one with a disability in the normate society. Third, the lack of authentic voices of people with disabilities, particularly women, in mainstream scholarship means that understanding disability continues to be built upon the dominant assumptions and interpretations of disability experience.

Garland-Thomson (2004) also stressed that the lack of analyses of disability experience within the general context means that researchers have failed to examine how particular images, signs, or metaphors of normality permeated in the general culture continue to explicitly and implicitly scrutinize the presence or absence of abnormality in

individuals with the traits of Other. Notably, the failure in analyzing the sociocultural rendering of disability experience has resulted in overlooking a critical role of disability as analytic and reflective lenses that see and negotiate one's positionality in relation to the disableist society. That is, experiencing or having impairment or being officially labeled persons with a disability does not automatically make them identify themselves as disabled (Asch, 2004; Finkelstein, 1993a; Titchkosky, 2001a). Likewise, experiencing or having impairment does not guarantee that they see their *problem* in ways in which non-disabled people perceive, assume, or imagine (Finkelstein, 1993a). Finkelstein (1993a) asserted that how persons with a disability identify themselves significantly influences whether or not they accept or reject help that is offered.

Previously, some special education scholars neutralized the sociocultural impact of labeling, arguing that little scientific evidence supported the negative effects of formal labels on students with disabilities (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1994; Kauffman, 1999a). Those scholars suggested that the field of special education did not need to believe the "fantasy" that the label had negative effects on individuals who were labeled as having a disability. They recommended, instead, that individuals with disabilities should accept the categorical/medical labels assigned to them as a part of a positive self-identity.

Asch (2004), however, contended that *disability-as-identity* might or might not come to each individual with a disability easily or naturally. She noted that identifying oneself as *disabled* involved complex processes of negotiating and renegotiating one's own physical environment, multiple identities based on race, gender, social class, and disability status, and cultural representations of disability that were never independent

from negative stigma, images, and stereotypes such as dependent, socially burdensome, pity, abnormal, and asexual. Asch commented that after many years of engagement in political action for social change as a disabled scholar and activist, what kept her embracing disability activism was a sense of deep obligation, and it was neither excitement, nor a single group identity, nor identity politics as disabled. It had been friendship and work with other disabled people through struggles for social change that made her feel that her efforts and actions were rewarding and positive, and it had not been a fixed view of *disability-as-identity* that made her feel positive.

Watson (2002) also illustrated complex mechanisms of self-identification of disability. In his study, the majority of participants with disabilities stated that they did not see themselves as persons with disabilities. Their comments revealed that perceiving themselves as persons with disabilities would mean identifying themselves with negative cultural stereotypes and images associated with disability. In a society in which social and physical structures were essentially arranged for people without disabilities, few social rewards would be given to those who identified themselves as persons with disabilities. Interestingly but understandably, those who did not see themselves as ones with disabilities also rejected altogether the conventional understanding of disability as personal tragedy. The participants' ways of naming their identities as "normal" showed that they wanted to signify themselves with their own personhood that was capable rather than dependent, abnormal, or different. These testimonials from individuals with disabilities and disabled scholars indicate that accepting institutionalized, categorical

labels and positively identifying oneself with these given labels as a part of one's own personhood is not simple or straightforward.

For individuals with disabilities, particularly women with disabilities who historically have been perceived as biologically deficient and culturally inferior, identifying themselves with the historical stigmatized marker, disability, is a quintessentially political act. Meekosha (2002) noted, "Our identities are constantly in tension, as we are defined by others and redefined by ourselves" (p. 67). Emancipating themselves from the wound images, reclaiming their own identities, and making their continuing struggles of accepting or resisting negative social identities visible are important theoretical and political agendas in which feminist disability scholars embark (Asch, 2004; Garland-Thomson 2005). This is why many disabled scholars place a great emphasis on retrieving the voices of women with disabilities and making their complex process of identity formation visible. Feminist disability theory invites an insider's view and encourages new dialogues on the disability experience so as to create new knowledge and methods to reveal the dominant cultural assumption of normalcy and aesthetic standards and combat discriminatory attitudes and practices toward diverse human traits that are perceived as deviations (Garland-Thomson 2005, 2004). Ultimately, it is the voices of people with disabilities that can inform the quality of social treatment toward them. Any political moves made *for* people with disabilities would not give them power to emancipate themselves in this Eurocentric-patriarchal-abled society if such moves do not reflect the values in which people with disabilities desire to put forth in their actions for social transformation, (Asch, 2004; Garland-Thomson, 2004; Thomas, 1999).



### **Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit)**

In the framework of feminist disability theory, the dominant view of disability as a fixed, medical, and universal condition is denied for its inadequacy in explicating everyday experience of disability to which individuals who are identified as having disabilities give meaning. Reconceptualization of disability as a means of social oppression aims to understand the asymmetric power structures between those who label and those who are labeled and how those structures have come to being. It also attempts to understand how the asymmetric power structures are affected by other power relations such as gender, race, and class. In doing so, feminist disability theory aims to politicize and eradicate negative rendering of disability and redefine the personhood of people with disabilities. These theoretical themes now are to be integrated into those of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit). The description of CRT and LatCrit also serves as an introduction of the methodology used in this study.

CRT emerged in the mid-1970s in the discipline of legal studies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The general purpose of CRT in legal studies is to fight against overt and covert racism in legal practices. CRT rejects the premise of American legal liberalism that believes in the neutrality, objectivity, and equality in both the procedures and the substance of American laws (Valdes, Culp, & Harris, 2002). It also aims to evoke racial consciousness in order to analyze and expose the structures of subordination and the power relations that have maintained white privilege in American laws (Valdes et al; 2002). By deconstructing the dominant legal discourses, it attempts to uncover how race and racism operate in the society and in the law. Critical race theorists emphasize the

necessity of critical analyses of social oppression by race and its intersectionality with other social categories such as gender and class because none of these categories is insignificant for understanding the overall life quality of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Valdes et al; 2002).

The emphasis on the intersectionality in the fundamental tenet of CRT is inspired by radical feminists' insights into the oppression of women in the existing society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Radical feminists assert that the existing patriarchal social system is the most fundamental source of women's oppression and that women's oppression is the hardest form of social oppression to eradicate because it exists ubiquitously in all societies and interlocks with other forms of oppression such as racism, classism, disableism, and heterosexism. They contend that combating women's oppression by challenging the patriarchal structure of society not only aims to liberate women from oppression but it also provides a useful conceptual framework to disclose other forms of oppression (Ollenburger & Moore, 1998).

While LatCrit takes a complementary theoretical stance to CRT, LatCrit extends its analytical lens to address issues that often are ignored by CRT such as ethnicity, language, immigration, culture, identity, phenotype, nationality, sexuality, ancestry, and other social categories that influence and shape the multidimensional positionality or *mestizaje* - multiple consciousness - of people of color living in and outside cultural borders (Hernandez-Truyol, 1997; Stefancic, 1997). Hernandez-Truyol (1997), among LatCrit scholars, emphasized the necessity of employing a nonessentialistic approach in illuminating and explicating Latinas'/os' experiences in legal and other disciplinary texts,

for their everyday experiences, their identities, and their voices would not be adequately captured without carefully attending to multidimensionality that consists of their personhood. Avoiding the identity-as-atomized approach allows LatCrit scholars to analyze and expose various forms of social contradictions in their everyday lives that may not be discernible by researchers coming from the dominant culture (Hernandez-Truyol, 1997; Solorzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001; Valdes, 2002).

Critical race scholars hold several propositions and themes that characterize and define their theoretical positionality. Among these propositions are that (a) racism is not *aberrational*, but deeply embedded in ordinary lives so that racism is difficult to eradicate or address unless it is manifested in obvious manners; (b) race(s) is a social construct or invented social category; and (c) minority voices hold a presumed competence to speak about race and racism due to their own histories and experiences with oppression that are likely to be unknown by the members of the dominant race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Valdes, Culp and Harris (2002) also explained that CRT holds a theoretical assumption that racism will not be eradicated without fighting other forms of social oppression such as sexism, homophobia, economic exploitation, and others.

Since the mid-1990s when Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced CRT to the field of education, a growing group of educational researchers has found its utility and significance valuable to educational research and the academic community. Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) delineated five themes consisting of a set of theoretical assumptions, research methods, and pedagogy of CRT and LatCrit framework applied to the field of education. These themes are (a) the centrality of race and racism

and intersectionality with other forms of subordination, (b) the challenge to dominant ideology, (c) the commitment to social justice, (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (e) the interdisciplinary perspective.

As these themes demonstrate, a theoretical significance that the CRT and LatCrit framework has brought to the field of education is an assumption that social inequalities exist in schools as social institutions. That is, in a field such as public education where equality is a core principle, as ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and where the existing educational system is believed to be well-intended, fair, meritocratic, and equal, the demystification of the existence of racism and other forms of social oppression in the discursive educational practices challenges and disturbs such taken-for-granted premises (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Obiakor & Utley, 2004; Spring, 2002). This framework also presents its own axiological stance and stands right in the face of the hegemonic paradigm that denies the involvement of any value judgment in their knowledge claim and makes discovering objective knowledge or universal truth an end in itself (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). The value that these frameworks place on research as praxis moves beyond traditional, positivist researchers' distanced, objective role that assumes no political responsibility for their supposedly neutral, objective research findings.

Certainly, deep concerns and issues regarding racial and other forms of discriminatory practices in education had been raised and discussed by a number of scholars even before CRT was introduced to the field. To give an example from the field of special education, a group of scholars had already begun addressing the need to reexamine the hardly challenged ideological and paradigmatic beliefs and assumptions

within and across the field. For example, Poplin (1988a; 1988b) argued that the received paradigm would only preserve deficit-driven practice while ignoring multiple layers of external factors influencing students' learning processes and outcomes. While Poplin acknowledged shifting paradigms to be a possibly daunting, risky undertaking as it would suggest the complete reformation of special education practice, she also believed that doing so would be imperative to broaden and develop new meanings of learning that would enable educators to assist a wide range of student needs more effectively.

Heshusius (1989a; 1989b) endorsed the need in special education to reexamine the field's positivistic, mechanistic assumptions embedded with the discursive modern ideology.

She put an emphasis on the redefinition of human exceptionalities not as individual deficits but as social constructions so as to holistically understand the complexities of factors and circumstances involving student learning in school context. Biklen (1987) also provided compelling arguments with regard to how social policy had intrinsically been entrenched with cultural meanings of disability and demonstrated the value-laden social policy continued to legitimate the marginalization of people with disabilities from the full participation in social activities including education.

More recently, Skrtic (1995) also deconstructed the discursive sociopolitical structures within educational fields. According to Skrtic, special education knowledge and practice traditionally has followed the practices and discourses of general education that are grounded on modern ideology that roots its origin in the Western Enlightenment movement. Modernism has developed positivistic scienticism that denies human subjectivity and differences in its logical inquiry in favor of scientific principles, such as

objectivity, neutrality, universal law and order, and technological progress. It therefore presumes scientific knowledge to be free from any social, cultural, economic, and political values and ideologies attached to human judgments and decisions. Moreover, the modern, positivistic view of science holds an assumption that human behavior is lawful and orderly. This assumption implies that the behavior principle is applicable to all individuals universally. Additionally, a modern, functionalistic view of human behavior holds that a single social reality exists, and it is orderly, rational, and functional. Much of American public school practices - schools as social institutions - are built upon and carried out through these ideological principles (Skrtic, 1995; Spring, 2002). Because these assumptions are indoctrinated in school context, school organization and its practice are conceptualized as rational and functional. Classification of students by ability or need, such as tracking, is thus justified as an objective, rational, and useful practice to design and provide curriculum in accordance with students' abilities. Progress of education is measured by the efficacy of diagnostic and instructional practices that should be reflected in students' greater academic achievement. Likewise, students' inability to function in ways in which schools operate is defined as school failure and thus as a pathological condition. Improving students' deficit conditions by providing scientific evidence-based diagnostic and instructional service has become a necessary school practice (Danforth, 1999; Skrtic, 1995). The heavy reliance on the legitimacy of the modern scientificism as *the* knowledge claim also has produced a condition where diagnostic and technical improvements are considered evidence of professional progress, resulting in the compartmentalization of professional expertise. With the field's obsession with defining,

redefining, and classifying disability categories, students' learning experiences and performance are reduced into definable, observable, testable, measurable, predictable, and controllable variables (Brantlinger, 1997; Skrtic, 1995). At the same time, the omission of contextual factors and power relations from inquiry process is rationalized by means of scientific inquiry (Danforth, 1999, 1997).

Given the inadequacies in the traditional special and general educational practices that overlooked extrinsic, contextual factors in evaluating student performance and behavior, a group of scholars challenged the dominant assumptions and contended that as long as students' performance was evaluated based on the hegemonic value of normalcy, students' inability to function in ways in which schools organized would continue to breed unnecessary school failure (e.g., Artiles, 2003; 1998; Danforth, 1999, 1997). They also asserted that the traditional paradigm fails to address the influences of the economic and political structures in the broader society on how students with disabilities perceive opportunity structure within and outside school context (Artiles, 2003, 1998).

However, the defense of positivist scientific practice within the field has been fierce. Alternative types of knowledge claims not only have inadequately been understood but also have harshly been criticized by another group of special education scholars who insist that losing faith in objectivity, universal truth, and value neutrality in special education research and practice only will lead the field to disarray (e.g., Kauffman, 1999b; Kauffman & Sasso, 2006a, 2006b). For example, Sasso (2001) interpreted that critical race theorists' and feminist theorists' attempts to debunk the power of the privileged in claiming valid knowledge were irrational and futile as their

purpose of doing so was to gain their political power by intentionally provoking a sense of guilt or discomfort from the privileged scholars playing a leadership role in academia. Such defense and interpretation, however, failed completely to understand the asymmetric power structure embedded in the traditional research paradigm that did not allow researchers of color to scrutinize what or whose perspective has been included or excluded in existing canonized knowledge. The question underlying the antipositivist arguments is whose interest or value has been served in search of truth in the social sciences enterprise, while particular groups of people are still forced to accommodate much of their personhood in order to survive and strive in this supposedly equal, non-discriminatory, and democratic society.

In *Whose Side Are We On* (1967), Howard Becker, an influential sociologist and researcher, argued that social sciences were always concerned about neutrality in research. Conceptually, the involvement of emotions, biases, or stereotypes in research production was prohibited in the traditional research paradigm. However, in actuality it was customary when researchers conducted research from the perspectives of the subordinates that their research findings were scrutinized and evaluated as *biased*. If a researcher took the side of drug addicts instead of the police; students instead of administrators, principals, or teachers; patients instead of physicians, her or his work likely was to be accused of bias because the *hierarchy of credibility* worked in favor of the superordinate who had political power to define “the way things really are” (p. 241).

As Becker illustrated, the conventional principles of social sciences research make legitimate the power relations where the knower interprets and represents the



voices of a large number of subjects who do not have power to do so (Mertens, 2005; Oliver, 1992). It is hardly a surprise to see that more than four decades later, the relationship between experts and researchers as the superordinate and research subjects and students with disabilities as the subordinate has remained stable in the field of special education where the traditional research paradigm still is a dominating force to claim knowledge (Danforth, 2000, 1997). While proponents of the dominant paradigm criticized praxis-oriented alternative paradigms, their strong objection to reexamining the traditional disciplinary knowledge and practice seems only to reveal their unwillingness to relinquish the power that enables the superordinate to discount self-knowledge and voices of students with disabilities and to dictate how disability is supposed to be experienced. Or, it may simply indicate that the asymmetric power relations between researchers or scholars as the knower and students with disabilities as the known/to-be-known under the present educational system may have been too deeply embedded in everyday practices to be discernible for those who are privileged to validate their own value systems.

Under the CRT and LatCrit framework, however, the hierarchy of credibility is questioned. Research inquiry no longer is obligated to develop the *right* questions in the *right* ways to discover universal truth *out there* (Delgado-Bernal, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1999, 2003). Instead, critical race researchers use their experiential knowledge as epistemological and methodological tools to expose and challenge the Eurocentric logic of neutrality and objectivity in scientific inquiry and to retell stories that reflect the realities they name (Ladson-Billings, 1999, 2003; Lynn & Adams, 2002; Tate, 1997).

Altogether, within the CRT and LatCrit framework, critical race scholars aim to tackle issues and concepts that hardly have been dealt with under the dominant research paradigm, such as race, racism, and power, all of which are too complex and contingent (Hayman & Levit, 2002) and are irrelevant to its pursuit for the discovery of universal laws or the truth (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 2003).

### ***Voices that Matter***

As in feminist disability theory, or more broadly in an emancipatory disability research framework, CRT and LatCrit place great value on the improvement of the communities of people of color and makes research relevant to their lives (Lawrence, 2002). The voices of people of color, including the voices of researchers of color, are critical and essential sources and tools to authenticate the unique experiences of people of color who are not illuminated adequately in the dominant scholarship (Delgado-Bernal, 1998; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1999, 2003). Of course, as Delgado (1990) emphasized, no single, monolithic voice that represents the lived experiences of people of color exists, for the intersection of social categories such as gender, race, and class constructs particularities in the meaning they give to what they go through. Yet, the *voices* of people of color certainly exist in a society where its structure is deeply embedded in racial stratification and discrimination (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The experiences of people of color under the strong influences of the racialized social system engender the commonality of what it means to live as nonwhite, referring it to their *voices* or situated perspectives.

Not surprisingly, Finkelstein (1993a), a disabled scholar, also made similar comments regarding the commonality of the voices of people with disabilities. In spite of the differences in how each person with a disability views herself or himself in relation to the outer world, the collective voices of people with disabilities exist in a society where social arrangements are made to privilege non-disabled people and their normative value systems. Despite the differences in the social category or the epistemological ground on which these scholars stand, these minority scholars' shared insights into the commonality of experience of race and disability suggest that the nature and quality of social practices are best understood by locating the situated perspectives of people at margins at the center of inquiry.

Recalling Oliver's (1992) conceptual framework of emancipatory disability research, it is clear that the theoretical themes and agendas of emancipatory disability research overlap with those of CRT and LatCrit. Given that CRT and LatCrit conceptualize the genuine voices or *narratives* of people of color as a methodological tool to understand and transform the lives and experiences of people of color, emancipatory disability research paradigm can greatly benefit from the methodological utility that CRT and LatCrit theories offer.

### **Through the Intersecting Lenses of Disability, Gender, Race, and Class**

All of the topics explored thus far function as preparation for the last section of the literature review that presents a brief background of students with disabilities in the juvenile justice system and their demographic and academic characteristics. This aims to provide a broad picture of the current trend of juveniles, particularly female juveniles in

the justice system, from the standpoint of a critical disabled researcher in the field of special education. A review of traditional theoretical accounts for female delinquency will follow. This review is not intended to apply particular theories of juvenile delinquency to examine the behavior of this specific young female population. Instead, I will discuss the traditional theories of delinquency in order to illustrate the social relation of research production in respect to how built-in gendered assumptions that are embedded with the supposedly value-neutral scientific inquiry have shaped disciplinary knowledge about young females in the context of delinquency. I will then juxtapose the dominant theoretical construct of female delinquency with the traditional medical approach to disability in order to demonstrate how these seemingly unrelated social constructs intersect and serve to produce and maintain social, economic, and political conditions where young females who are marked with multiple social categories continue to be the target for the dominant discourse of patronization, medicalization, and normalization.

Ultimately, the inevitability of the integration of feminist disability theory with the CRT and LatCrit framework in this study reflects the necessity to overcome the ideological, theoretical, and methodological shortcomings inherent in the dominant paradigm that has failed to analyze and expose power relations that have subjugated the perspectives and experiences of those who are at the bottom of the hierarchy of credibility. At the same time, the integrated theories nested in the emancipatory disability research paradigm aims to create a space for these young females to authenticate the meaning that they give to their experiences. Through their voices, a critical analysis of social conditions surrounding young females with disabilities in the context of

delinquency becomes feasible. I also will underline the importance of the use of research methodologies that endure incoherence, contingency, ambiguity, contradiction, and fragmentariness that are the fundamental nature of what our everyday life experience entails (Garland-Thomson, 2004), yet which have not been tolerated in the dominant research paradigm.

### **Profiling Gender: Young Females in the Juvenile Justice System**

Studies consistently have reported that the prevalence of high incidence disabilities among youth in correctional institutions is alarmingly high. For example, the U. S. Department of Education (1999) reported that while approximately 9% of students ranging in age from 6 to 21 receive special education services, 32 % of youth and adolescents in correctional facilities are identified as having disabilities prior to incarceration. A recent national survey also reports that approximately one-third of juvenile offenders in correctional facilities are eligible for special education services as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Quinn & Rutherford, 2005).

The disproportionate representation of youth and adolescents with high incidence disabilities in correctional facilities is not a contemporary phenomenon. Earlier studies warned that the majority of incarcerated youth and adolescents were in need of special education services. For example, Rutherford, Nelson, and Wolford's (1985) study estimated that 28 percent of the total population in state juvenile correctional facilities had been served in special education programs prior to incarceration. The continuing

phenomenon of the disproportionate representation of youth and adolescents with disabilities in correctional institutions is a serious educational as well as social problem.

Traditionally, delinquency was considered a young male phenomenon and the academic/school failure-delinquency trajectory was identified predominantly among young males. However, recent research indicates that such is no longer the case. Current research has added another concern related to the profile of juvenile offenders. After the peak year of 1994, male juvenile arrest rates for aggravated assault and simple assault gradually decreased through 2004 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2006; Snyder, 2006). In contrast, female juvenile arrests have remained at nearly their highest levels for the same categories (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2006; Snyder, 2006). Additionally, female juveniles showed less decrease in arrest rates in many offense categories than their male counterparts. Between 1995 and 2004, female juvenile arrest rate for simple assaults increased (31.4%) whereas male juveniles showed a decline (-1.4 %). The arrest rate for aggravated assault also showed less decline for female juveniles than male juveniles (-2.9% vs. -27.6%). Female juvenile arrest rates for Violent Crime Index (murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) and Property Crime Index (burglary, Larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson) showed less declines than male juveniles (-11% vs. -34.3%) and (-21.1% vs. -46%), respectively. In 2004, female juveniles were responsible for 33% of juvenile arrests for simple assaults and 24% for aggravated assault (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2006).

During the same ten-year period, female juvenile arrest rates continued showing substantial increases in many offense categories, including prostitution (113.5%), sex

offenses (49.5%), drug abuse violation (29.3%), driving under the influence (69.1%), liquor laws (16.6%) and disorderly conduct (32.9%), whereas the arrest rates for male juveniles in the same categories increased for only two offenses: sex offenses (9.4%) and driving under the influence (11.4%) (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2006). The rapid change in the profile of juvenile offenders in the last decade has drawn official and public attention, prompting researchers to attempt to identify factors contributing to this trend in order to reverse it.

Criminological research has documented that juvenile offenders share similar characteristics: They are likely to come from disruptive families, to have been sexually or physically abused or neglected, and to live amid poverty and violence in their neighborhoods (Reiman, 2004; Schumacher & Kurt, 2000; Shoemaker, 2005). The more severe these conditions are the higher these youth's risk for involvement with the juvenile justice system tends to be (Schmacher & Kurz, 2000). Academically, they are more likely than others who are not involved in the juvenile justice system to receive poor grades, to be retained, to be suspended from school, to have unsatisfactory relationships with teachers and peers, and to be served in special education programs (e.g., Foley, 2001; Katsiyannis, Zhang, Barrett, Flaska, 2004; Keith & McGray, 2002; Robinson & Rapport, 1999; Special education & the Juvenile Justice system, 2000; Zabel & Nigro, 2001). Demographically, as is so in special education programs in regular schools, youth of color and those from low-income families are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system (Arnold & Lassmann, 2003; Coutinho, Oswald, Best, 2002; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Rozie-Battle, 2002; Salend, Garrick Duhaney & Montgomery, 2002).

Although still very limited, recent research focusing on young females who are involved in the juvenile justice system reports patterns similar to those of their male counterparts: A history of repeated sexual or physical victimization is identified as one of the most common characteristics shared among young females who are brought into the juvenile justice system (American Bar Association & National Bar Association, 2001; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004). Many female juvenile offenders also struggle in schools. Some research has found that as many as 14 % to 58% of female juvenile offenders are diagnosed as having disabilities or may have been eligible for special education services mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Fejes-Mendoza & Miller, 1995; Kataoka, Zima, Dupre, Moreno, Yang, & McCracken, 2001; Ruffolo, Sarri, & Goodkind, 2004; Sanger, Creswell, Dworak, & Schultz, 2000; Sanger, Moore-Brown, Magnuson, & Svoboda, 2001). This pattern of racial and class disproportionality is also seen among female juveniles: Those who are from racial and ethnic minorities and from low income families tend to be disproportionately confined (American Bar Association & National Bar Association, 2001; Rozie-Battle, 2002; Ruffolo et al., 2004) and more likely to receive harsher punitive treatments than their white counterparts when they committed similar types of offenses (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004).

Research on delinquency continues to suggest that poor school attainment is strongly associated with delinquency involvement (e.g., Baker, 1991; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004; Leone, Meisel, & Drakeford, 2002; Poulin, Harris, & Jones, 2000; Schumacher & Kurt, 2000). Studies also consistently demonstrate that achieving academic success or having high educational expectations can mediate or reduce risk for



school dropout as well as recidivism and underemployment or unemployment (Archwamety, & Katsiyannis, 2000; Chester, McEntire, Waldo, & Blomberg, 2002; Clark & Davis, 2000; Triplett & Jarjoura, 1997). Education also is identified as a vital means for both female and male juvenile offenders to gain self-esteem, necessary skills to empower themselves, and access to opportunities to achieve their goals upon their release and in their transition to school and community (Clark & Davis, 2000; Davis, n. d.; Schumacher & Kurt, 2000; Triplett & Jarjoura, 1997). Educational programs and activities thus have become a significant component in delinquency prevention and intervention programs (Clark & Davis, 2000; Schumacher & Kurt, 2000).

Very importantly, the most recent education laws, including the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, now set an expectation that youth with and without disabilities in juvenile and adult correctional institutions meet the same state academic content and performance standards as students in regular schools (U. S. Department of Education, 2003). Under this political climate where youth in correctional institutions are included in the accountability system mandated in NCLB, ensuring that, regardless of their disability or legal status, they receive appropriate educational and related services in regular schools and correctional or court-ordered educational institutions has become a critical task for those involved in the American school system (Leone & Cutting, 2004; Mayes, 2003; Morrison & Epps, 2002).

In spite of the social and economic significance of educational attainment emphasized, recent research suggests that existing educational and vocational programs

and related services provided in educational institutions, including regular schools, fall short in responding to the complicated and unique needs of students at multiple margins who must deal with a variety of social inequalities in and out of school context (Keith & McGray, 2002; Leone & Cutting, 2004; Morrison & Epps, 2002; Rosie-Battle, 2002; Skiba et al., 2002). Young females who are involved in the juvenile justice system are among those who do not fully benefit from existing educational, vocational, and therapeutic programs (Ruffolo et al., 2004; Schram, 2003). Fejes-Mendoza and Miller (1995), in their early work on this topic, noted:

The juvenile female offender is perhaps the most enigmatic, misunderstood, underserved student in the United States educational system. Not only do the educational and therapeutic needs of this population often go unidentified or unserved, but the specific personal, social, and criminal variables that impact on a young woman's ability to function independently in adult society remain unclear (p. 309).

Unfortunately, these comments made a decade ago do not sound outdated. Given that female students in the United States educational system in general largely have been and continue to be neglected in research and theory across various disciplines, Fejes-Mendoza and Miller's comments show a persistent indifference to the continuing struggles of female student population, especially those at multiple margins.

Furthermore, the adjectives that Fejes-Mendoza and Miller used to describe juvenile female offender—*enigmatic*, *misunderstood*, and *underserved*—clearly indicate that what has been learned about these young females may have been inadequate or peripheral at best and destructive and oppressive at worst. This signifies the ongoing theoretical and methodological insensitivity to a variety of factors that justify inadequate

understanding of and educational services for this specific student population.

Researchers then play a key role in reproducing the ideological status quo that keeps marginalizing young females whose access to equitable educational opportunities have been severely limited. Why was the misunderstanding produced and how has it been sustained?

Feminist criminologists, among others, now contend that the inadequacies in existing intervention programs and treatments for meeting young females' unique needs is an acute reflection of the shortfall that the traditional research approach to delinquency involving young females intrinsically possesses: The majority of existing programs are developed on the basis of empirical research carried out by male, middle-class researchers focusing on the experiences and needs of young males likely coming from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods (Chesney-Lind, 2003; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004; Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004). While early male-oriented theories of delinquency have shaped disciplinary knowledge about delinquency and professional understanding of who young males and females committed to delinquency are, they have failed to carefully analyze the social significance of gender in the context of female delinquency. This failure was serious enough to overlook how the social system of gender shapes the realities of girls and women qualitatively and quantitatively differently from those of boys and men (Belknap, 2003; Bloom, Owen, Deschenes, & Rosenbaum, 2002; Brewster, 2003; Morash, 2006; Schram, 2003).

### ***(Mis)Conceptualization of Female Delinquency***

When female delinquency was analyzed within early biological and psychological theoretical frameworks, girls and women were considered to have a genetically and biologically less-inclined nature toward criminal behavior (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004; Shoemaker, 2005). For example, Lombroso and Ferrero's (1895) *The Female Offender*, one of the most influential works in this camp, explained that criminal behavior in general was that of degenerate disposition and that such wicked traits were identifiable in criminals' physical appearance (e.g., excessive body hair, a large jaw, high cheekbones, bumps on the head, moles, and tattoos) (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004; Shoemaker, 2005). Because these physical traits were less visible in female criminals, females were considered to be less prone to be involved in crime. However, because of this defined less-inclined nature of females toward criminal behavior, girls and women who committed to crime were considered the most immoral, wicked, spiteful, and ill-disposed criminals of all (Shoemaker, 2005); they were believed to exhibit extremely masculine traits that were compounded by the worst qualities in women (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004; Shoemaker, 2005; Stuart van Wormer, & Bartollas, 2000). Lombroso and Ferrero (1895) also documented that while female criminals were deficient, jealous, and vengeful, their biological weakness and underdeveloped intelligence balanced their malicious dispositions, which made them less capable of committing serious crimes and more prone to sexual crimes.

Early bio-psychological approaches to female criminality also assumed that mental deficiency, psychiatric disturbance, general personality configurations, and

subconscious conflicts were the primary causes of their criminal behavior (Shoemaker, 2005). For example, Freud (1949) described girls and women as being anatomically inferior to males. He concluded their biological makeup and maladjustment during particular psychosexual developmental stages were the contributing factors for their involvement in crime (Freud, 1949; Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2000; Stuart van Wormer & Bartollas, 2000). This approach also attributed behavior problem to disturbance within the individual and such a troubled condition was believed to remain within the individual fairly and stably, as was intelligence (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004; Shoemaker, 2005). Unfortunately, despite the insufficient evidences supporting female delinquents/criminals as biologically, morally, psychologically, and intellectually deviant or inferior, these theoretical assumptions that were confounded with patriarchal or masculine norms set the tone for understanding female delinquency and were accepted until relatively recently (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004). Due to the often sexual nature of offenses by females, young females who were brought into the juvenile justice system were called *wayward girls* and treated as sexual dirty or morally contaminated, resulting in their receiving more severe and longer sanctions for less serious offenses than young men (American Bar Association & National Bar Association, 2001; Chesney-Lind, 2003; Dohrn, n. d.).

The *gender role* approach that emerged in 1950s began discussing the influences of gender roles on the types of delinquent behavior in which girls and boys engaged. This approach asserted that gender was not biologically determined or inherited, but was learned through differential gender role expectations and socialization. Gender roles therefore were considered to determine the types of delinquent behavior for young males

and females (Artz, 1998; Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004). For example, boys were assumed to engage in masculine types of crimes such as gang fighting and carrying weapons, believing that violent crimes were what men were supposed to do. In contrast, girls were assumed to commit to “feminine” types of crimes such as running away, truancy, shoplifting, and prostitution (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004; Stuart van Wormer, & Bartollas, 2000).

Yet another influential approach to female delinquency discussed women’s emancipation from traditional gender roles. This view often called the *liberation* or *gender-equality* hypothesis assumed that the women’s movement during the 1960s contributed to greater freedom of women. This increased women’s opportunities to participate in the public sphere and in the labor force. Increased opportunities for employment not only improved women’s economic condition but also *masculinized* them, leading to the increase in their involvement in territories in which girls and women had not been allowed to enter earlier, including involvement in delinquency and crime (Adler, 1975; Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004; Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2000). The liberation hypothesis suggesting the “dark side” of women’s emancipation has been well received, though a number of criticisms have been made for its inadequacy in explaining delinquency or crime involvement of girls and women of color and those with low income who hardly benefited from women’s movement (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004; Morash, 2006).

By and large, and unlike theories of male delinquency that take both micro and macro influences on behavior into account, gendered accounts for female delinquency

have tended to focus on a micro-level conceptualization of gender that is related more to a cultural idea of femininity or masculinity than to gender as one of the social systems in the broader society (Morash, 2006). Whether due to the abnormalities in bio-psychological mechanism or due to the result of socialization, the prevailing assumption about young females in the context of delinquency is that it is these young females who manifest particular forms of deviance from the norm; it is young females who are becoming more destructive, hostile, or liberated than in the past. Importantly, the lack of sensitization in the traditional theories to gender as a social system concomitantly indicates their inadequacies in analyzing and explaining how young females' social locations are organized not only by the social system of gender but also by that of race and class. The relative lack of systematic analyses on females' delinquent behavior in the broader social, economic, and political contexts therefore has resulted in the dearth of theories that adequately address complex effects of gender, race, and class locations of young females in the existing social structure on their social and economic status, material conditions, choices, opportunities, and expectations relating to school/education, work, family, and leisure (Lynch, 1996; Miller, 2001; Morash, 2006).

### ***Female Delinquency as a Social and Political Construct***

Given the range of complex extrinsic factors associated with young females' law-breaking behavior that remain unattended in the traditional theories of delinquency, the masculine gaze on female behavior in the context of delinquency has become subject to scrutiny. Chesney-Lind (2002), one of the leading feminist criminologists, noted, "If 'abuse' is de-contextualized, if the motive of the violence cannot be considered, and if the

meaning of the “violence” behavior is irrelevant, then we will arrest more girls and women” (p. 86). In contrast to a seemingly favored interpretation of rising female juvenile arrest that attributes to the radical changes in behavior patterns of young females’ over the past decade, a recent body of criminological research has identified that the substantial increase in female juvenile arrest is, ironically, to a great extent, due to the increasing academic, police, and public attention shifted from young males to young females who long have been neglected in criminological research.

Steffensmeier, Schwartz, Zhong, and Ackerman (2005), in their recent study on trend in young females’ violence and the gender gap, examined several major longitudinal studies on crime/delinquency and found little evidence that could support the popular view of the narrowing gender gap in violence. For example, an analysis of official aggregated data such as the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports found statistically significant increases in the arrest rates of female juveniles on the Violent Crime Index. However, when looking at each offense under the Violent Crime Index, the narrowing gender gap was found only in less serious violence offenses, and male juveniles still were in the lead in this category. In 2004, 81.3 % of male juveniles were charged for the Violent Crime Index offenses with 18.7% of female juveniles being charged for the same offenses. Within the Violent Crime Index, 83.8% of female juveniles were charged for aggravated assault and the remaining 16.2% consisted of the charges for murder, forcible rape, and robbery. This suggested that female juveniles were disproportionately charged for *status offenses* that referred to misbehavior that would not be regarded as criminal if committed by an adult (e.g., runaway, truancy) and *simple assaults* of which definitions



are value-laden and more ambiguous in the nature of charges than serious offenses such as murder and robbery. In addition, Steffensmeier and his colleagues' analysis of unofficial, self-report type of data sources such as the National Crime Victimization Survey, Mentoring the Future, and National Youth Risk Behavior Survey found no meaningful changes in the gender gap in juvenile violent offending over the past one or two decades. The discrepancies between the relatively unchanged patterns of girl's violent behavior found in these data and the rapid changes in female juvenile arrest depicted in the official data suggested that the patterns of the rise or decline in female and male juvenile arrest rates were the result of the shifted attention from male juveniles to female juveniles and the major changes in legal definitions of offenses and policies in handling of cases involving young females, in turn escalating young females' arrest-proneness (Steffensmeier et al., 2005).

There is an increasing consensus among researchers focusing on female delinquency that unfortunately, in many instances, girls' self-protective strategies in abusive or unbearable conditions in their immediate environments have resulted in their involvement in running away, shoplifting, and prostitution as means to survive on the street, and these behaviors make it difficult for them to continue to attend schools. Besides, for many young females, even schools are battle fields where they must handle multiple layers of obstacles, including but not limited to, gender, racial, and class discrimination, sexual harassment, and verbal or physical assault by their peers and adults. They constantly feel pressured to protect themselves from physical and emotional

harm and fight for their own safety and sense of dignity (e.g., Acoca, 1999; American Bar Association & National Bar Association, 2001; Artz, 2004, 1998; Morash, 2006).

With increasing public concerns about personal and public safety, the lowered or zero tolerance to youth's misdemeanors in schools and in the community, and "gender-equalized" law enforcement practices operating together, many types of youth misconduct that once were categorized as disorderly conduct or status offenses now have been relabeled as *assault*. An example of the ramification of relabeling status offenses is illustrated in Acoca (1999)'s study. Her extensive review of case files involving young females and interviews of them revealed that the majority of young females were charged for *assaults* that took place in contexts where these young females were in a fight with parents or other adults known to them, and in many cases they were not the ones who initiated the fight. Throwing cookies or a Barbie doll at a mother was an example of behavior that was charged as assault.

Furthermore, recategorizing young females' misdemeanors from status offenses to assault, or *bootstrapping*, that is, "charging young people who have not committed a criminal offense with a delinquent offense for violation of a court order," (Office of Justice Programs, 1998, p. 27) has been associated with the disproportionate representation of young females of color and with low income in the juvenile justice system. Given an assumption underlying the practice that the parents or caregivers of these young females are inadequate in providing proper supervisions and disciplines to their daughters, the get-tough approach likely gives harsher treatment to young females who violate gendered social expectations (Acoca, 1999; American Bar Association &

National Bar Association, 2001; MacDonald & Chesney-Lind, 2001; Morash, 2006). The impact of gendered practices in social institutions further are intensified by racial and class discrimination where the behavior of young females of color and with low-income is stereotyped, misunderstood, and disciplined differently from their white counterparts (MacDonald & Chesney-Lind, 2001; Morash, 2006). Mass media also keeps playing a significant role in producing and reinforcing negative and exaggerated iconic images of delinquent girls or young criminals as if they were very different from the rest of us and the involvement in delinquency or crime was the mere consequence of their choices, actions, or life styles (Barak, 1996; Chesney-Lind, 2002).

Disappointingly, the gendered theories of delinquency translated into practices have contributed to designing and implementing educational and vocational programs that keep reinforcing the patriarchal value system. This continues to promulgate gendered stereotypes and replicates the Eurocentric, patriarchal social structure within the juvenile justice system and other educational settings (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004; Schram, 2003). Normalizing biological, cultural, and moral deficiencies of these young females by rescuing and patronizing them, discrediting their experiential knowledge, and changing their values and beliefs have been the main objectives of existing educational and vocational programs (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004; Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004; Kilgore & Bloom, 2002; Schram, 2003). As a result, females in correctional facilities are less likely to receive programs that go beyond the types of vocations that are traditionally occupied by women, such as sewing, cooking, other domestic services, food services, clerical work, or cosmetology (Schram, 2003). A critical disadvantage of such

programming is that these types of training may no longer address young women's interest nor help them to find competitive and well-paid employment. It is not a surprise that existing educational and vocational programs grounded on the traditional gendered theoretical assumptions have neither benefited nor liberated young females in the juvenile justice system in their search for opportunities to achieve successful transition in the midst of or after their setbacks (Schram, 2003).

***Limitation of Professional Gaze on Gender, Race, and Class as Mutually Exclusive Categories***

Fortunately or inevitably, a feminist approach to the analyses on the gendered accounts for female delinquency has had a great influence on the direction of research on young females in the context of delinquency and crime. Foci of research gradually have begun shifting toward the analyses of interplay between young females and the patriarchal social system with respect to how social, economic, and political circumstances surrounding young females increase their risks for the development of antisocial pathways and how the social system of gender that intersects with other social systems such as race, ethnicity, and social class operate to shape young females' social realities and life options (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004; Levene, Walsh, Augimeri, & Pepler, 2004; Miller, 2001; Odgers, Schmidt, & Reppucci, 2004). Given the disproportionately high rates of physical and sexual victimization in the histories of young females who are brought to the juvenile justice system, an increasing number of researchers across disciplines such as psychology, psychopathology, and counseling also have begun emphasizing the necessity of gender-specific or gender-responsive programs

that address the unique needs of this young female population (Antonishak, Reppucci, & Mulford, 2004; Fejes & Miller, 2002; Veysey, 2003). This trend also is seen in recent research in the field of special education. Some researchers suggest the importance of gender-specific programs in the areas of mental health diagnosis and service delivery practices for young females with education-related disabilities (e.g., Coutinho & Oswald, 2005; Quinn et al., 2005).

However, while the significance of gender-specific programming and comprehensive mental health assessment and service delivery is being highlighted, the significant importance of critical analyses of intersecting oppressive social forces in educational institutions against female students who are challenged by a range of social contradictions is still downplayed in educational research. This statement is not intended to underestimate the psychological and clinical research that emphasizes the importance of mental health services for young females whose experiences often are traumatic. The majority of young females involved in the criminal and juvenile justice system who have had to endure a series of negative life experiences at an early age are found to be in need of mental health services in such categories as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD), conduct disorder, and substance abuse problems with high rates of comorbidity (Antonishak et al., 2004; Kataoka et al., 2001). Providing comprehensive mental health treatments and programs that are designed to meet the complex needs of these young females who likely have been exposed to terrifying life circumstances is essential to assist them in ameliorating their

negative experiences so as to build their strengths (Dixon, Howie, & Starling, 2005; Kataoka et al., 2001; Veysey, 2003).

However, even if the mere shift of the foci of research inquiry could change the rules of the game, it does not change the nature of the game. That is, as long as research inquiry exclusively focuses on a single social category, say gender, in terms of how the behavior and needs of females students with or without disabilities are different from their male counterparts, such an essentialistic approach continues to conceptualize young females as a homogenous group and as if they had to deal with similar sociopolitical, socioeconomic, sociocultural realities, regardless of their race, ethnicity, language use, social class, or sexual orientation. To put this differently, even if the foci of research are shifted from gender to race, ethnicity, or social class, the nature of the game stays the same. Reid and Kelly (1994), in their discussion of research on women of color, wrote that if researchers fail to adequately understand why race or ethnicity significantly influences the lived experiences of women, their superficial acknowledgement of race or ethnicity as a research variable to understand women of color is only to shift women of color from a stage of once completely being invisible in research to another stage of being objectified and examined as anomalies.

Likewise, unless researchers acknowledge the implication of the failure to analyze how the exclusionary social systems of gender, race, and class intersect with that of disability and operate to make daily struggles of females students invisible, the essentialistic approach sustains its medical or pathological gaze at the individual and not at the social structure that keeps failing to attack its ineffectiveness in inequitable policies

and practices, or *assistencialism*, as Freire (1973) might call it. Without exposing the underlying ideological assumptions embedded not only in the existing mental health and legal practices but also in educational practices, the definitive role that these institutions assume is to teach those who are at the bottom of social, economic, cultural, and political hierarchies not how to question but how to subscribe and co-opt the value systems of the privileged (Crenshaw, 1991; Flax, 1993; Young, 2000). Very critically, the mere recognition and exposure of gender, race, and class as mutually exclusive categories have not allowed researchers to effectively address barriers constantly facing students at multiple margins because political interests and agendas addressed by each social category often conflict each other (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Crenshaw (1991), a critical race scholar, discussed serious limitations of identity politics in empowering women of color in the context of violence victimization. According to Crenshaw, while identity-based politics or identity politics has played a critical role in improving social conditions of people of historically marginalized groups such as women and people of color, fighting for social justice on the basis of a single identity-based politics has not been free from certain dilemmas.

In the context of violence against women, for example, efforts to politicize violence victimization of women of color do not always parallel feminists and antiracists: Feminists' political agendas often subsume racial or ethnic differences within the group of women victims or vice versa. Racism and sexism intersect and create a wide range of the barriers and obstacles against women of color, which make it difficult for them to articulate their everyday struggles of violence victimization solely through the

representative voice of white women victims (Crenshaw, 1991). Therefore, treating gender and race as mutually exclusive categories can lead only to inadequate understanding of violence victimization experienced by women of color, in turn causing them to experience further intersectional marginalization and disempowerment. The failure to acknowledge the intersecting effects of the social systems of gender, race, and class in the context of violence victimization of women of color often contributed to unsatisfactory networking service delivery among social agencies. Frustration and burn-out experienced by service providers (e.g., counselors) who attempted to meet the complex needs of women victims of color often were the common result (Crenshaw, 1991).

As Crenshaw portrayed, the narrowed approach to understanding the needs of young females involved in the juvenile justice system particularly is problematic in the context of young female students with disabilities. That is, disability and delinquency appear to be conceptually different subject matters. Disability is subject of care and support. On the other hand, while the juvenile justice system aims to provide treatment and rehabilitation that meet the best interests of youth in the system, delinquency is still subject to punishment and sanction. In the context of juvenile delinquents with disabilities, these two conflicting social constructs are deeply interwoven; disability as a medical problem or functional abnormality has played a role in justifying educational disservices to them by confirming deficit conditions of youth who are marked with multiple institutional identities.



***Stamped with an Essence: Delinquency, Disability, and Differences***

As early as in the 1960s, some criminologists developed influential theories explaining a linkage between academic and school failure and delinquency involvement, including Cohen's (1961) middle-class measuring rod theory and Hirschi's (1969) social control theory. These theories underscored the detrimental effects of academic and school failure on (a) youth's motivation to engage in delinquency as an alternative means for recognition (Cohen, 1961) or (b) weaker *social* bonds with schools (Hirschi, 1969). When these theoretical accounts are applied to students with disabilities (school failure theory), students are considered assumed have higher risks for school failure due to their greater difficulties in learning (Fink, 1990; Robinson & Rapport, 1999).

Another theory, *susceptibility theory*, assumes that various problems associated with learning disabilities function as predisposing factors contributing to the higher rates of involvement in antisocial behavior among youth with learning disabilities (LD). The problems identified include neurological difficulties (Fink, 1990; Rutter & Giller, 1984); poor reception of social cues; a diminished ability to learn from experience (U. S. Department of Education, 1999), language deficits in conceptualization, comprehension, and judgment (Brier, 1989; Waldie & Spreen, 1993); and negative personality (Waldie & Spreen, 1993). Yet another theory, differential treatment theory, explained that youth with lower IQ or with LD were more likely than those without disabilities to be referred to and receive harsher treatment in the juvenile justice system due to their lack of skills for avoiding detection, their inability to comprehend the questions and situations during

the police encounters and proceedings, or their abrasive behaviors toward the police or juvenile justice personnel (Brier, 1989; Keilitz & Dunvant, 1986).

As these examples illustrate, in the context of juvenile delinquency, disability, or more specifically, education-related disabilities, has been utilized to systematically confirm delinquent youth's intellectual, psychological, and moral deficiencies or abnormalities (Morrison & Epps, 2002; Reiman, 2004). What is critically problematic in relying on these theoretical approaches in understanding experiences and needs of youths with disabilities who are involved in the juvenile justice system is that the dominant conceptualizations of delinquency and disability as primarily internal deficit conditions effectively obscure hegemonic power and its logic that ontologically and epistemologically determine the nature and cause of problems and superimpose solutions of the problems on those who are stamped with the inferior markers.

Crenshaw's (1991) analysis of the often incompatible political agendas between feminists and antiracists in advocating for women of color in violence provides a good analogy to the political dilemma that long has challenged young individuals with disabilities who are involved in the juvenile justice system. That is, given that the racial, gender, and class disproportionality in special education programs and in the juvenile justice system is a long-standing and intractable educational and social issue, a group of scholars, researchers, and advocates has made great efforts to inform those who work with juveniles in the juvenile justice system and the public of the necessity of comprehensive approaches to properly evaluate and identify a wide range of difficulties associated with juvenile offenders' disabilities that make them susceptible to engaging in

socially unacceptable behavior (e.g., Tulman, 2003; Tulman & McGee, 1998). Another group of researchers and scholars also have addressed the critical shortcomings of the existing educational and legal systems by describing how these systems continue to fail to eradicate racial bias and discrimination in assessment and disciplinary practices (Losen & Orfield, 2002; Losen & Welner, 2001; Wald & Losen, 2003). For example, Losen and Welner (2001), in their review of disability and education laws such as the IDEA, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disability Act of 1990, discussed the extent to which these laws should have protected minority students with and without disabilities from racial discrimination in the educational system.

However, these approaches, taken out of necessity to expose and attack ongoing institutional and structural discrimination in the existing social institutions, including schools, have not yet challenged and politicized the hegemonic ontological assumption of *what disability is*. If the political agenda of those who attempt to educate other professionals and the public with respect to how disability affects socially inappropriate behavior exhibited by students with disabilities who are brought into the juvenile justice system, speaking for students with disabilities while failing to acknowledge the underlying hegemonic conceptualization of disability, may only have reinforced the medical conception of disability. Likewise, if the primary political agenda is to enforce civil and educational rights for students based on their disability status, such an agenda may have to be in conflict with those whose agendas are to expose the *power relations* in the process of conceptualization and categorization of disability and to politicize the social and material consequences of social categorization or labeling in and of itself.

Finkelstein (1993b) argued, “As long as there is no possibility of gaining access to services or social and welfare benefits without surrendering to the label “disabled” there will be no possibility of maintaining that an individual or group is not disabled” (p. 13). He demonstrated the significance of reflecting the epistemological perspectives of individuals who are identified as having a disability in understanding what disability is and how disability actually is experienced by those who are so labeled. As long as the social structure assigns disability to play a role as an authorized credential or a rite of passage (Biklen, 1987) to provide a person with a disability needed resources for legal protection, free and appropriate educational services, or social welfare, she or he may find her or himself yielding to the label that signifies inferiority.

Recalling how young females have been conceptualized in the traditional male-oriented theories of delinquency where their gender (femaleness) alone was theorized to represent their biological deficiency and cultural and moral inferiorities, the extent of inferiorities imputed to juvenile delinquents with disabilities can be intensified in the context of young females with disabilities who are involved in the juvenile justice system. Marked with the 3Ds (delinquent, disability, and differences), young females with disabilities who are involved in the juvenile justice system are neither ideologically, conceptually, nor theoretically to be liberated from both their invisibility and the troubled Self ascribed by the dominant normalizing, medical, and masculine narratives unless the concepts of delinquency, disability, and difference or otherness provide alternative constructs that guide new dialogues for social and educational transformation and emancipation.

### **A New Direction toward Research Inquiry as Emancipatory Dialogues**

Given that existing theories guide the direction, selection, and evaluation of programs and implementation of educational and related services, and that it is theories that drive changes in policies and practices, a great concern is the lack of theories in the field of special education that elucidate and politicize a range of historical, social, economic, and political conflicts greatly affecting the everyday experiences and opportunity structure of young females who are challenged by the multiple forms of social oppression is a great concern. Reid (1993), in her discussion of the ongoing paucity of psychological research on poor women and women of color, argued that the limited volume of research on women at the margins might best illustrate how the disciplinary field of psychology had maintained its egocentric and introspective stance and trivialized the perspectives and lived experiences of women being outside the dominant cultural group. Similarly, the dearth of critical research on female students at multiple margins in special education may be a good portrayal of how the field remains egocentric or ignorant about “self-imposed limits in our views of everyday phenomena in the lives of a variety of women” (Reid & Kelly, 1994, p. 483).

In summary, few researchers in academic communities may really know what it feels like to live as poor, racial, ethnic, or linguistic minorities, female, immigrant, or delinquent, while being one with a disability living in the normate society. The notion that the *personal is political*, as feminists from all walks of life have emphasized, needs to be taken seriously in considering the historical and social ramifications of the invisibility of young females with disabilities who are involved in the juvenile justice

system in research and theory. How disability is experienced by these young females who are involved in the juvenile justice system is not a mere private matter but essential in order to understand the historical, social, economic, cultural, political, and educational conditions and climate surrounding young females living in today's society. They see the outer world through the lens of *disability* and its intersection with gender, race, and class.

### CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This study comprised a qualitative mode of inquiry. I utilized multiple methodologies, including critical ethnography, narrative inquiry, and (counter) storytelling nested within the framework of CRT and LatCrit. The selection of multiple methodologies was inspired by what Denzin and Lincoln (1994) called, *brocolage*, a “strategy that adds rigor, breath, and depth to any investigation” (p. 2) and what González (2001) called *trenzas y mestizaje*, a multimethodological approach that allows qualitative researchers to braid their cultural and experiential knowledge into educational research, policy, and practice. The selection of these methods was not intended to be carried out in a mutually exclusive manner. Rather, I foresaw that braiding these methods would be necessary for me as a critical researcher to accomplish my research goals.

#### Methodological Framework

Qualitative researchers, in general, agree that there is no single correct method or *design* to conduct qualitative research as the underlying ideological, ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions that lead researchers to particular inquiry may vary and as the study of social phenomena and human behavior requires a wide range of methods and approaches (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Deyhle, Hess & LeCompte, 1992; Maxwell, 1996; Wolcott, 1992). Yet qualitative researchers share several fundamental features or reasons for choosing qualitative methods: Qualitative researchers

are deeply concerned with the process and context under which human action occurs and the local meaning that people give to their daily experiences. For them, it is neither adequate nor sufficient to understand human action or social phenomenon without interrogating the context in which it is situated (e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Kramp, 2004).

Schwandt (2000) defines context as both “each individual’s specific history, identity, and affective-emotional constitution” (p. 204) and “the relationship between parties in the encounter with its history, identity and affective definition” (p. 204). For Schwandt, it is narrative that links these two components. Because context mattered in this study, narrative became an essential vehicle to understand the meaning that young females with disabilities who were involved in the justice system gave to their experiences. In addition, and very importantly, I did not think there would be any other way to elucidate their lived experiences without devoting my ear to their stories.

### **Critical Ethnography**

Ethnography that is traditionally granted is a disciplined study of describing and reconstructing a culture (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Spradley, 1979). With the use of a range of techniques such as observation, ethnographic interviewing, and field notes, to name a few, ethnographers provide rich descriptions of what people do and know as members of a particular cultural group (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Doing ethnography means “*learning from people*.” (Spradley, 1979, p. 3, emphasis in original); through the local, indigenous, or subjective point of view of people dwelling in a particular context, ethnographers attempt to systematically and analytically represent the meaning that



members of the particular cultural group give to their everyday experiences. The general goal of ethnography is to contribute a new understanding of other ways of living one's life for people who live outside the context (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Spradley, 1979; Wolcott, 1992). Doing ethnographic research therefore requires researchers to go beyond existing methods in order to achieve different purposes that they aim to accomplish through research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Wolcott, 1992).

While critical ethnography may utilize data collection techniques as conventional ethnographic research does, a feature distinguishing critical ethnography from conventional ethnography is its orientation toward emancipatory, transformative, and democratic goals that guides researchers to conduct their inquiry (Carspecken & Apple, 1992; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994; Quantz, 1992; Simon & Dippo, 1986). According to Quantz (1992), critical ethnography could be good ethnography, yet being good ethnography is not always critical. By critical, it is meant that the work of critical ethnography quintessentially is pedagogical and political: The researcher has a clear consciousness of whose interests she or he serves in one's work. Critical ethnography, therefore, does not refer to a mere research method or technique (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994; Simon & Dippo, 1986).

Simon and Dippo (1986) described critical ethnography as a project that is "an activity determined both by real and present conditions, and certain conditions still to come which it is trying to bring into being" (p. 196). A deep concern rooted in critical ethnographic work is how the asymmetrical cultural, economic, and political power relation existing in our society continues to reproduce the inequitable social structure that

favors and legitimates the perspectives and experiences of the historically privileged while subjugating those of the underprivileged. Therefore, a critical project requires the researcher be clearly aware of the political intentions in her or his research that define problems to be investigated and desirable alternatives to be explored (Simon & Dippo, 1986).

Critical ethnographers are cognizant of the existence of historically structured cultural hierarchies embedded in institutional practices, including school practice, that continue to shape opportunity structures of the historically marginalized. The recognition of the discursive unequal power structure in a society is the starting point for critical inquiry (Carspecken & Apple, 1992). Therefore, as Quantz (1992) clarified, the question about which critical researchers ask in their research is neither whether or not some groups of people are marginalized nor whether or not those who are identified as the marginalized identify themselves as such. Rather, what is important to ask is how the asymmetric social, political, and material relations are manifested in the everyday experiences of people who are subject of multiple social oppressions. They attempt to understand and act on their findings through a variety of strategies that ethnography can offer (Carspecken & Apple, 1992; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003; 1994; Noblit, 2004; Quantz, 1992).

My selection of critical ethnography as a method was anchored both in the initial grounding of ethnography and in critical researchers' clear intention and motivation to engage in ethnographic work with the mindset of questioning and challenging the status

quo and claiming new knowledge to be used for social transformation by placing an emic view into a broader discourse of history and power.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Until relatively recently, historical and narrative research has remained undervalued by traditional social sciences researchers largely because the domain of narrative analysis long have been conceptualized as epistemological other; the concept of narrative was limited to non-theoretical representation of identity or non-explanatory accounts for local events, which apparently was not commensurate with large-scale, theoretically-driven social sciences research agendas (Somers, 1994; Mertens, 2005). However, narrative, once considered collections of unauthorized voices and stories and materialized predominantly by anthropologists and sociologists in early times as a representational form of understanding different cultural groups, gradually has been reconceptualized as a mode of social inquiry (Chase, 2005). This narrative turn, to a large extent, is owed to an increasing awareness by researchers in various social sciences disciplines with regard to how one's own idea and perception of *self* is constructed and changing through the relationships with the broader society in which it is embedded (Berger & Quinney, 2004; Goodson, 1998).

Indeed, the significance of narrative in qualitative research lies in the inherent nature and roles of narrative in our lives. For example, Tappan (1991) noted that narrative is a vital means not only to understand how people make sense of their lived experiences but also to understand how particular social structure shapes the way in which they interpret what they go through in everyday life. Narrative therefore keeps reminding all

of us that our life experiences are never independent from others and the society (Bogdan & Taylor, 1976; Bruner, 1988; Erickson, 2004). Furthermore, narrative, whether in the form of spoken or written, belongs to those who give meaning to their experiences and so those who tell stories own the authorship of their own stories (Tappan, 1991).

Kramp (2004) reiterated, “Narrative privileges the storyteller” (p. 111). This suggests that narrative inquiry opposes the traditional, hierarchical relationship between the knower and the known (Kramp, 2004). This allows researchers as listeners to legitimately center the perspectives and voices of their participants and to examine their lived experiences and context from their own systems of knowing. This process also resists the value-neutrality maintained in the traditional research paradigm and requires the researchers to be involved in critical analysis and reflection of their own historical and social positions in the relation with their participants. Subjectivity which traditional, positivist researchers try to eliminate from their inquiry processes is no longer a foe or an impediment in qualitative research inquiry and narrative inquiry in particular, as researchers are inevitably aware that they becomes a part of the context where their research takes place.

In addition, narrative, reconceptualized as a method for social change, is concerned about the long history of the absence of the perspectives of minority group members in the mainstream disciplinary discourses (Berger & Quinney, 2004; Chase, 2005; DeVault, 1999; Somers, 1994). Doing narrative inquiry is a politically driven practice: It takes the perspectives of participants seriously so as to gain greater insights that facilitate collaborative actions for social transformation (Chase, 2005). The selection

of narrative inquiry as a method particularly is my reliance on its utility to conceptualize narrative as social epistemology and ontology (Somers, 1994) that allows me to understand how the participants come to understand their lived experience, specifically the experience of disability in the multiple social context they are situated.

### **(Counter) Storytelling**

Krame (2004) explains that a story is a kind of narrative. Therefore, the method of (counter) storytelling in the current study could have been understood as a branch of narrative inquiry rather than an independent method. However, since (counter) storytelling as a method within the critical race theory and Latino critical theory framework has its own purpose and significance, I nonetheless counted it as a method to be braided into the multimethodological approach utilized in this study.

Delgado (1989, 1993), in his early works, argues that the significance of the method of (counter) storytelling lies in stories being told by those whose lived experiences hardly have been considered to be story-worthy. Delgado (1989) emphasizes that stories are powerful means to destroy the assumption that what the dominant cultural group go through is *the fact, the reality*. The stories of those who are forced to endure their historically and socially disadvantageous conditions reveal how the master narrative continues to justify the social, economic, and political privileges in which the dominant cultural group has taken it for granted to have.

Stories also cure people of color; stories serve to facilitate their survival and liberation as they help people of color engage in dialectical inquiries into how their realities came to be and what actions they need to take for their own empowerment and

social transformation (Delgado, 1989, 1993). Very importantly, storytelling as a research method offers opportunities for people of the dominant cultural group to learn how to listen to stories that are different from their own and help them understand themselves better (Delgado, 1989, 1993). From my own standpoint as a disabled woman, devoting my ear to the stories of female with disabilities in itself already was of great significance, for I know how few such opportunities have been given to us. I also know that it is about our stories and not anybody else's.

To summarize, what these methods could offer matched well the emancipatory disability paradigmatic framework, as these braided methods privilege participants' voices, challenge the dominant ideology, and engage in critical analyses of social conditions in understanding of the experience of disability in the context of female students with disabilities in the juvenile justice system.

### ***Time and Length of the Study***

My inquiries to correctional, educational, and community agencies in attempting to obtain access and resources for recruiting participants began in late October, 2005. Most of my fieldwork, such as interviews and observations, was completed by the end of May 2007. However, until the end of June, 2007 I continued to contact several individuals and professionals in educational, mental, and legal institutions where girls who participated in my study were involved, including a therapist, juvenile probation officers, a lawyer, teachers and program managers, when I needed their input, feedback, and further information.

### ***Research Relationship***

The primary source for recruiting participants for the current study was a local office of the Department of Juvenile Justice in a state in the southeastern region of the United States. My initial recruitment activity largely depended on juvenile probation officers who could have young female clients in their caseloads who would meet the criteria for my study. My recruitment resources extended later on to school systems in several counties in the state. Upon requests made by educational program directors in those counties, I submitted my research proposal and it was approved. The program directors assisted me in finding educational sites where additional candidates could be recruited.

Until the parents, guardians, or custodians of possible participants provided me with a signed parental consent form, I did not have any access to meet and talk with the candidates. In all cases, signed parental consent forms were obtained with the assistance of the teachers, the juvenile probation officers, or the program managers of participant candidates. At initial meetings with each participant candidate, I explained my study in the presence of a witness. After I made sure that a candidate understood the purpose of the research and that her participation was completely voluntary, I asked her to sign on consent forms and then gave her copies of the signed consent forms.

### ***Sampling Strategy and Defined Characteristics of Participants***

Participants were purposely selected. A strategy used to recruit participants was criterion-based selection (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). I established in advance a set of characteristics that participants for this study should share. The original characteristics

included females (1) whose age ranges from 13 to 21; (2) who had been adjudicated in the juvenile justice system and those who were not or had not been adjudicated but were referred to court-ordered or community-based services; and (3) who previously received or currently receive special education services mandated in IDEA. Those who were eligible for the services but had dropped out of or had not received services were included.

For the first six months of the study, I encountered a great difficulty in gaining access to this population. This difficulty made me realize that expanding access for recruiting participants was necessary. Based on primary and on-going analysis of the data I had gathered during the recruitment period, I also began to think that data analysis would benefit from modifying some of the criteria for participant selection. For these reasons, modifications of my approved research were made twice during the course of this study. These modifications included changes in the criteria for selecting participants. Specifically, added criteria were (1) girls as young as 12 and (2) girls who did not have an individualized education plan (IEP) but who were identified by the juvenile justice system as having serious behavior problems in schools. Several agencies also were added as resources for information and access to recruiting participants. All modifications were indicated in IRB modification applications and they were approved.

Qualitative researchers such as McCracken (1988) suggest that less is better when research is concerned with context rather than number. He notes that eight is by far a sufficient number for a qualitative research, particularly for long interviews. I followed McCracken's suggestion and planned to have a small number of participants, no more



than 15, which had included consideration of the high likelihood of some attrition during the course of the study. Between March and October of 2006, the number of participants recruited was five. Of the five, only 2 participants met the criteria originally established. After the modifications were made, the total number of participants who agreed to participate reached twelve. Of those, two participants were not included to the final analysis because the obtained information was not sufficient for the final analysis. Participant characteristics were detailed in Appendix E

### ***Data Collection Strategies***

I utilized a set of strategies to obtain multiple sources of data grounding of the multimethodological approach. These strategies included interviewing, observation, fieldnotes and memos, and other forms of data. It should be noted, though, that these strategies did not constitute triangulation. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) suggested not using this abstract term triangulation because different researchers began using the term with different meanings and different definitions so that the term itself already has become confusing. Therefore, instead, I paid a careful attention to describe what I did in order to account for the multimethodologies used in this study.

***Interviewing.*** The primary strategy for data collection was verbal response from a series of individual interviews. The format of the interviews was semi-structured, consisting of open and closed questions. In addition to a set of primary interview questions, the nature of qualitative research allowed me to develop subsequent interview questions. A list of primary interview questions was attached in Appendix A. A short questionnaire that I had developed was also used during the first or early interviews with

each participant. The short questionnaire served two purposes: (a) to obtain a broad idea of participant needs as well as their participation in and knowledge about the IEP and (b) to assure them that the main foci of my interview topics would be their educational experiences and educational services and not on their juvenile case histories. On most occasions, the use of the short questionnaire helped me to initiate conversations. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed.

Most interviews were carried out in the schools the participants were attending. Other settings included group homes and a community-based residential facility. Each individual interview lasted between 15 minutes and an hour, depending on what each participant wanted to discuss as well as time and conditions permitted for each interview. Individual interviews were done with the same participants several times. I tried to keep a weekly schedule for interviews with the participants, except a few participants whom I interviewed at their group homes. The total time spent for interviews with each participant varied from approximately 46 minutes to 3 hours and 30 minutes. The average interview length was two hours. The number of interviews with each participant also varied from two to eight. Interviewing was completed when I found that themes began recurring. However, with a few participants, interviewing ended when they were out of reach due to their relocation to other places or when their life circumstances no longer allowed me to continue interviewing with them.

Group interviews also were completed with several participants. The format of the group interviews was semi-structured with a combination of open and closed questions. On average, group interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. They were audiotaped

and transcribed. The total number of the page of verbatim transcription from both individual and interviews group interviews was approximately 360 (double-spaced). The anticipated benefit of group interviews was to be balancing the power disparity between participants and myself as researcher. Johnson-Bailey (2004) noted that when a group of participants outnumbered a researcher, the participants in the interviews would have the ability to control the interviews, which also could facilitate conversations that might not be carried in individual interviews. If the group interview participants stayed same, group interviews in themselves also could function as member checks (Denzin, 1994; Johnson-Bailey, 2004). In fact, the benefits of the group interviews were tangible. They allowed me to see how participants changed and negotiated their mannerisms and responses considerably differently in group versus individual interactions.

**Observation.** Observation was another strategy for data collection. The primary purposes of observation were to portray the research context, analyze how the context inferred social and institutional meanings, and see how my participants would present themselves in those institutional sites. Observation also was designed to determine in what ways and by whom educational needs of young females were identified and addressed in each institution, that is, school, the juvenile justice system, and other institutional settings.

Classroom settings were the primary sites for observations. Other observations included court proceedings and parental meetings, and a therapeutic training session. Except for a few occasions where my role seemed to be more that of an advocate or a teacher aide in some activities and settings, my role during observation was deliberately

passive. While the number of observations was relatively small, they turned out to be one of the most challenging yet productive experiences and avenues for my reflection and analysis.

***Fieldnotes and memos.*** Fieldnotes were another important data collection strategy, consisting of descriptive and reflective fieldnotes. The intended goals of descriptive fieldnotes were to provide a picture of the research setting as if to take snapshots of it (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) and to analyze possible meaning that people in the research setting might infer (Carspecken, 1996). Specifically, descriptive fieldnotes included descriptions of participants, physical setting, activities and events observed, and the researcher's behavior. Reflective fieldnotes served as an indispensable vehicle to guide on-going reflection on my fieldwork in relation to participants and the settings for this research. They included reflections on methods, analysis, dilemmas and conflicts during my fieldwork, and the positionality of my own as researcher in terms of how the theoretical views taken and my experiential knowledge cut across and interconnect, and then influence the ways in which I collect and analyze data. I created a document file, which I called theoretical memos. Theoretical memos served two purposes. One of the purposes was to write down ideas that popped up during the stages of data collection and data analysis. They particularly were useful to code data collected, find relationships between primary ideas and emerging ideas, and develop new or different codes when necessary. Another purpose was to specifically collect my reflections and ongoing analysis of how participants' perspectives correspond, confirm, or disconfirm theoretical

views that I employed in the study. Memoing began as soon as I collected first field data and continued until I produced the final report of the study.

***Other forms of data.*** Other forms of data consisted of responses from the short questionnaire, poems written by some participants, email correspondence, official documents such as student records, and formal and informal conversations. Collected materials included the public statements of philosophy and program information written in pamphlets and brochures. Access to juvenile and medical records also was available upon agreement with the participants and their parents or guardians. Additionally, I created a contact log to record contact information, including date, contact person/institution, topic/purpose for the contact, and type of data/information gathered. While this log was recorded in a simple form, it turned out to be a helpful tool both for my data collection and analysis because it made it easy to trace my fieldwork activities in a chronological order.

### ***Methods of Data Analysis***

Carspecken (1996) and Carspecken and Apple (1992) developed a research method called *critical ethnography method* that was grounded on a critical research framework. Critical ethnography method consists of five stages, aiming to effectively and meaningfully identify inequality and power relations. These stages include: (1) monological data collection, (2) preliminary reconstructive analysis, (3) dialogical data generation, (4) describing system relationships, and (5) explaining system relations. Broadly explained, Stage 1 involves observation with minimum interference on the part of the researcher in order to objectively portray what is taking place in the research

context, using multiple data collection techniques, such as observations and video or audio recording. In Stage 2, the researcher begins engaging in reconstructing meaning of what she or he objectively observed during Stage 1. In Stage 3, the researcher engages in real interaction with research participants in the form of interviewing. In Stage 4, with the gathered data available, the researcher begins to examine social systems in terms of the relationships between the participants and the social context in which they live in. In Stage 5, the researcher attempts to explain the complex system relations as to how particular system relations create social practices that subordinate people of particular cultural groups.

Due to the nature of the qualitative mode of inquiry, I had anticipated before beginning this research that changes in my design would likely occur throughout the course of the study. In fact, given various constraints facing me, such as the unexpectedly prolonged difficulty in recruiting participants and having participants in multiple research sites with different daily institutional schedules, I realized in the earliest stage of this study the impossibility of collecting needed data from all participants at once and moving one stage to another stage. Further, I came to a realization that data analysis was after all not a separate research process but a part of research process. The critical ethnography method preserves flexibility in applying its basic components to differently designed qualitative research. This flexibility was an advantage that I embraced in modifying my research design while continuing to achieve my research goals. Therefore, instead of following each stage one by one, I employed this method as a guide to outline my fieldwork and a reference to systematically examine my data through my conceptual and

theoretical standpoint. My data analysis took a form of overlapping data analysis, referring to collecting and analyzing data simultaneously in order to retain freedom to make adjustments during the data collection process (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Preliminary data analysis began when I started compiling primary data through my fieldwork. These data included observation notes, official school records, review of juvenile files, and official handouts and brochures placed in several community and educational agencies as well as field notes and memos. Preliminary data analysis aimed to develop an initial list of possible coding categories. The preliminary analysis was done manually, meaning that I duplicated all the data available at that time and then read through the hard copies as I began jotting possible codes down on a piece of paper beside me. Other sets of data, such as a short questionnaire, verbatim transcriptions from both individual interviews and group interviews, continuous observation notes, official and unofficial communications, review of updated juvenile records, and on-going field notes and memos were added as my fieldwork activities proceeded.

All the data sets were then entered into NVivo 7, a qualitative software package. This would be considered the stage 4 and 5 in the critical ethnography method briefly described above. While preliminary codes were developed manually, I used the software for sequential analysis, referring to a combination of within- and cross- case data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The sequential analysis was practically and methodically beneficial. For example, while the procedures of data collection with each participant were relatively similar, the prolonged recruitment for participants made me obtain data from each participant at different time period. The findings from earlier participants often

assisted me in developing additional interview questions for recent participants as if their responses were to function as member checks. When all data sets were in hand, I began cross-case analysis. Upon finishing the sequential analysis, I began initial write-ups. Data analysis and interpretation continued into the stage of final write-ups.



## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

I embarked on my research with three theoretical views. First, the hegemonic conception of disability as a medical problem or functional abnormality subjugates young females with disabilities and disregards their perspectives, voices, and social realities with regard to how they actually experience disability. Second, disableism exists ubiquitously in society and intersects with other forms of social oppression such as racism, sexism, and classism. These oppressive systems create social conditions that impede young females with disabilities, especially those at multiple margins, from obtaining equitable educational and vocational opportunities. Third, stories told by young females with disabilities at multiple margins enable the critical disabled researcher to interrogate why their stories have been dismissed from the mainstream discourses on disability and what happens to them when their stories remain unheard.

These theoretical views aimed to make sense of and explicate how young females who are involved in the juvenile justice system experience disability. I focused on (a) analyzing and exposing underlying hegemonic assumptions about disability held in social institutions, (b) analyzing how those assumptions shape the educational experiences, opportunity structures, and needs of young females with disabilities in the juvenile justice system, and (c) retelling and redefining the experience of disability from the side of young females.

This chapter begins with brief background information of the research context. Three sections corresponding to the original research questions follow. Each section includes research findings and discussion. Due to the nature of the study, the original research questions were evolved and modified when appropriate and necessary. The process of the changes was discussed.

### **Background Information of the Research Context**

My interest in studying young females with education-related disabilities in the juvenile justice system began in the fall of 2001. I started an internship at a courthouse under the mentorship of a chief district judge. I was hoping that learning about juvenile court proceedings would help me map out the domains of life challenges that court-involved youth, especially youth of color who were identified as having a disability, were likely to face outside of school. I also wanted to learn how the educational needs of court-involved youth were addressed in juvenile proceedings. The district judge willingly agreed to accept me as one of his interns and suggested that I observe as many juvenile cases as possible in order to become familiar with basic juvenile proceedings, as well as the challenges that both the juvenile justice system and young men and women who were brought to the juvenile justice system continuously faced.

A front corner of a courtroom where most juvenile cases were held became the designated spot for my observations. I was privileged to situate myself where all parties attending hearings were within my sight, including a judge; district attorneys; juvenile defense lawyers; court counselors; juvenile defendants and their families; case managers; social workers; representatives from community programs, mental health agencies, and

schools; and others. I observed case after case, approximately 10 to 12 cases per day. By the end of the internship, the total number exceeded 500.

Several weeks after I began in my observation corner, I began noticing similarities and differences in male and female juveniles appearing in the courtroom. North Carolina, where I observed cases, is one of only two states in the United States where minors at the age of 16 are charged as adults. Therefore, the girls whom I saw in juvenile courtrooms were supposed to be 15 years of age or younger. However, many girls looked much older than their actual age. They also appeared older than their male counterparts. They looked more tired than boys, as if they had been on the run until the day of their court appearance. Girls often looked angrier than boys. They sank into their seats with a sulky look as if they were saying, "I don't deserve this." Or, they just looked down as if they decided not to hear anything discussed about them.

Oversized t-shirts and low-hanging baggy pants were the typical fashion style that characterized male juveniles, which perhaps made them look similar. I did not see as many pop-culture iconic clothes that could characterize the girls. Rather, it was perhaps the ways in which they were represented in the courtroom that made them look similar: they ran away; they were incorrigible; they failed to abide by their probation conditions; their resources for treatment were exhausted; or they were absent from school and ready to drop out of school.

Observing how girls were represented in the courtroom often reminded me of the often-noted comment about so-called troubled girls: Girls are much harder to work with than boys. Girls in the system were notorious. Females? Oh, they don't care about

education. They don't care about school. Their parents don't care much about their daughters' education either. They will be doing some part-time jobs or staying home, doing nothing. They won't take responsibility for their own lives. They will be social welfare-dependent. I do not know how many times I heard comments like these in juvenile justice and mental health settings; it was too numerous to count.

Retrospectively, I realize that I had few thoughts about the extent to which cultural expectations of girls held would affect one's perceptions and ideas of who court-involved girls were and what kinds of needs they would have. In fact, the primary concerns that drove me to do my internship in the legal setting was the intersectionality of race and class in relation to delinquency involvement and special education needs, or more broadly, disability status. Gender was not my focus. The disproportionate representation of young males of color in the juvenile justice system and in special education programs was too visible to ignore. Gender to me at that time was not a salient life issue, but disability was. When gendered assumptions were infused in everyday institutional practices and in the patriarchal social practices, it would be easy to fail to realize how our ears are accustomed to tune in to the masculine voices that dictate what young females were supposed to be and how they should behave.

Court observations continued on a daily basis during the internship period. As I gradually gained the knowledge about juvenile court proceedings that had been my goal, including the nature of charges, how cases were discussed, and what decisions were likely to be made and why, a particular issue began to worry me. It related to a noticeable number of juveniles, particularly female juveniles, who were described to be in need of

mental health or medical attention. It was often mentioned in discussion of the best interests of the juvenile, which seemed to have influenced the placement and treatment plans. “Many juveniles have mental and emotional problems” was an institutional message I received during my observations.

The message to me was contradictory. First, although special education is not all-inclusive in terms of what conditions are covered under the federal law such as the IDEA, if a large number of both male and female juveniles was identified as having some kind of mental disorder or emotional problem, it did not appear to correspond to the under-identification of female students in special education programs. This seemed to suggest that many female juveniles who were underserved in schools were deprived of access to educational services and opportunities that they deserved. Second, by conceptualizing a number of juveniles being in need of mental health services, the risk of mistakenly interpreting mental disorders as a primary cause of delinquent behavior seemed high. This may lead to a hasty conclusion that providing juveniles with mental health treatments will reduce delinquent behavior. This can further lead the juvenile and mental health system to conceive that the causes and solutions of delinquency and disability are primarily in individuals or families, while making it easy to overlook a range of social, cultural, and economic factors that bring young females to the juvenile justice system. I came to realize that the overlapping effects of gender and disability caused young females to be involved in the juvenile justice system more than I had originally thought.

### **Research Question 1: What Does It Mean to Be a Young Female with a Disability?**

This question is too broad to answer without context. It is same as other questions, such as ‘What does it mean to be an Asian female?’ or ‘What does it mean for a girl to grow up in a low-income family?’ This is what the experience of disability entails. Without context, it is impossible to explicate what it means to be a young female with a disability. The focal point of the context was the juvenile justice system.

But what does it really suggest to understand the meaning that a young female with a disability who is involved in the juvenile justice system gives to her experience? The difficulty in understanding how a person with a disability experiences disability is that if one focuses only on what the person is identified with, which is disability, one is likely to end up understanding nothing, for the experience of disability is not a collection of private episodes that are isolated from the rest of an individual’s experiences.

It is important to note that I was still trying to reify the experience of disability during my fieldwork. That is, I had been struggling to circumstantiate the experience of disability without referring to my own experience of disability. I wanted to share my experience of disability with my female participants so as to engage in dialectical conversations with them whenever possible and appropriate. However, at the same time, I did not want to interfere with their own ideas of disability or how they had experienced it, at least until they became comfortable enough to talk about it. One of my participants, Andre, a 14-year-old African American participant who has provided me incredible opportunities to think the unthinkable throughout the course of the study, helped me think

through with this struggle. During an interview with her, I asked about the best experience she remembered about school.

K: Then, what was the best experience you have had while you are in here?

A: What do you mean by “experience”?

K: Like hum.... what is the best...hum...hum... memory...you have had as a student...

Hum...do you have any good memory....?

A: Well ..... not really. We used to go places every Fridays but now since we don't go nowhere. Now ... cause people get fighting. People fighting, so....

Andre's questions made me realize that I needed to define what “experience” in the context of disability entailed and how to differentiate its meaning from a more general idea of going through or passing through.

According to Bruner (1988), telling about one's life may consist of three different components, including a life as lived, a life as experienced, and a life as told. A life as lived is what actually happens, whereas a life as experienced comprises “images, feelings, sentiments, desires, thoughts, and meanings known to the person whose life it is” (p. 7). A life as told is a narrative. The narrative is influenced by the audience, the social context, and how a culture shapes patterns of storytelling.

Reflecting on these different components that compose one's lived stories led me to question how well we actually know young females with disabilities situated in different social settings, or about the barriers, problems, and needs perceived from their own viewpoint. In fact, the question “what does it mean to be a young female with a disability?” should be broken down further. What does it mean to be an adolescent and a

female, and at the same time, identified as having a disability and being involved in the juvenile justice system? In order to answer this question, it is inevitable to pay heed to each age, gender, race, and class formation that a society organizes. It is essential to consider what power structure has created these formations, what assumptions and value systems are embedded in the power structure, and how these formations arrange particular social, economic, and political conditions which shape the everyday realities of a young female living in a particular place at a particular historical period of time. The ability/disability value system coexists with the gender, race, and social class systems. Therefore, the young person who is ascribed with particular social categories continuously makes sense and interprets what she goes through as she assimilates or refuses to accept the predetermined social structure and value systems that position her in particular social relations. Her meaning-making undergoes complex cultural processes that incorporate all these categories. This is what it would take to understand what it means to be a young female with a disability in the juvenile justice system.

However, most social practices, including research practices, do not account for the importance of attending to such details, or they sacrifice the details for the technicalities of scientifically based or empirically driven research. Instead of undertaking the meticulous research required to interrogate the existing social practices from the viewpoint of young females with disabilities situated in a particular social context, a general approach to the understanding erroneously limits its foci on issues relating to disability to the extent that researchers, practitioners, and policy makers want to know or can bear to know.



Not surprisingly, the negative ramifications of silenced voices are manifested in the lived experiences of young females who took part in this study. Their words inform how they have felt about their voices being silenced, ignored, and unauthorized, and how they have tried to cope with oppressive and disempowering social conditions. These examples signify what it means to be a young female with a disability in the juvenile justice system.

### **“We are Rarely Heard Out”**

On the whole, talking with the participants was enjoyable. This does not mean at all that I was not anxious about the interviews. Some people in correctional and mental health agencies had warned me that talking with so called troubled girls would be challenging because they might not listen to me or talk to me much or I might hear them say, “I don’t know.” These warnings just let me think that these challenges could happen to me. I had worked with juveniles in a short-term correctional facility, and neither male nor female students gave me a hard time. Therefore, the “troubled” part was not my concern. I was concerned about whether they would be willing to talk about their everyday experiences, especially when my questions would relate to disability. Parker’s (1999, original in 1978) poem, *For the White Person Who Wants to Know How to Be My Friend*, illuminates the delicate consciousness that I try to capture. The poem begins with the two lines:

The first thing you do is to forget that i’m black.  
Second, you must never forget that i’m black. (p. 99)

This is exactly how I feel about my disability. This tells me that if I assumed how and why my participants experience disability only because of the disability label imputed to them, I would completely fail to understand not only how they experience disability but also who they are. I have had some occasions when I was invited to be a guest speaker as one with a disability. I never had been unwilling to talk about my experience as a disabled person but I always felt afterward as if I left unfinished work behind. I always felt that by talking about how I have handled my disability, I missed talking about how it led me to live my life as who I am. I did not want to make my participants feel the same way I did, which perhaps made me nervous talking about disability.

Most girls appeared anxious when I met them for the first time. At first, I could not tell if they were going to be interested in the study. Some of them had been described as having issues going on in their homes which would prevent them from being in the frame of mind to participate in the study. However, when I began explaining that giving voices to young females facing multiple life challenges was one of my research goals, I noticed that they were interested in the idea in terms of the roles that they would be going to play.

Jade, a 16-year-old African American participant whom I met at a residential facility, was one of the most outspoken participants. As soon as she learned about this study, she was excited about the idea of letting others know what young females living in difficult life conditions are going through. She confirmed the importance of giving young females opportunities to let others know what they were going through by writing poems from their perspective. The act of writing poems was prompted by me. However, she had

had the deep thoughts expressed in the poems before we met to talk. Jade showed me one of the poems at the beginning of our second interview.

*A Young Female's Perspective*

Our voices are not heard no matter what the problem,  
 Age, Gender, Ethnicity, or where we all are from.  
 Think about this question and ponder for a minute,  
 Have we ever had a good and stern female president?  
 Black, white, Puerto Rican or Asian,  
 Us females, together, can form a new nation!  
 Help each other out females, pull each other up,  
 Get your sister out of shit, if they end up stuck.  
 Ladies turn your voices up like your song on the radio.  
 Be assertive to what you say and watch us strongly grow!  
 Respect your body and your sister, be a role model,  
 Show them that you care and that you're very loyal.  
 Some of us are based on sexism, some of us are not,  
 It's not what's on the outside but the inside is what we forgot.  
 Stand up for what you know, don't let no one put you down,  
 You will feel so much better, than lowered to the ground.  
 Let's make this world a different place,  
 No matter what gender, creed, or race.  
 Females, let's run this race until we reach the finish line.  
 Encourage your sister, do not leave her behind.  
 So to make a long poem short, Females come together for all.  
 Big, little, woman, man, short or even tall.  
 If you take the time and think, Females always have warm hearts.  
 Let's build each other up, instead of taking each other apart.  
 We our sister to thrive and to live.  
 This is a poem by a young female and her perspective.

Being a young female is to experience her voice being completely ignored. Her poem itself was moving and inspiring; it convinced me of the power that breaking the silence of young females facing multiple life challenges can bring to them. However, there is more to this poem. After reading the poem carefully, I find that she skillfully illuminates various dimensions of the barriers that plague many young females today. For

example, she explicitly and implicitly shows the depth of problems she has been facing, such as differential treatment by race or ethnicity, continuous struggles of women who historically have little power for social change, gendered assumptions and stereotypes, lack of role models and leaders, in-group/same gender hatred, and above all, social oppression in the form of silencing young females. Jade clearly articulates that the everyday struggles of young females do not occur on an individual level but in the broader social system, which may not be transformed without forthright political actions for equality and entitlement.

Adoncia, a 15-year-old participant, placed at the same residential facility, also wrote a short poem, titled *Whatz Life*:

Whatz life w/out the law  
 Could it be violence everywhere  
 Well thatz already going on

This poem shows an amazing contrast with another poem, titled *Locked* ↑.

Locked ↑  
 I have done a lot of dumb things  
 But nothing is compared to the pain I bring

Locked ↑  
 People talking and people saying  
 She has nothing to work for  
 Keep on praying

Locked ↑  
 Blades & guns I bring to school  
 But everybody but the cops thinks itz cool

Locked ↑  
 Seeing people dying & people crying

Now I am locked  
Now I am trying

Locked ↑

Adoncia, a survivor of multiple instances of sexual abuse by adults and as a witness to extreme levels of violence, perceives various kinds of violence and injustice against children and youth. Her poems demonstrate the ineffectiveness of existing policies or *assistencialism* (Freire, 1973), where social policies do not attack deep-rooted social ills but punitively treat symptoms of individuals who are significantly influenced by the social ills. As recent research on crime by girls and women suggest, Adoncia captures the power of the authority that trivializes and degrades unjustified struggles that she has had to endure.

I did not specify any topic when Jade and Adoncia agreed to share their written expressions of voices with me. I asked them to write anything that came to their minds. While their poems were written to be read and to inform what is going on in their everyday lives, they demonstrate that their situated perspectives critically perceive and evaluate the power-ridden social practices.

I asked both Jade and Adoncia several times how they felt about giving voice in research like this, sharing their thoughts through conversations and interviews with me, and responding to interview questions. Jade feels:

Okay. I...honestly, I thought you really cared. You don't have many people that take time out their day or after job or whatever to come to ask girls of this world a set of questions about special education stuff. Because some people could not even give a flip what could happen. But I feel like someone actually took the time out and actually cared and actually care about people's life.

K: Really?...I'm so...I'm so glad to hear that.

Yes, I actually, I just feel like I was really cared cause you don't find many people that well you know ask people about education and stuff. I've never been into a setting, hum., communication or dialogue with someone like you. Because it means a lot to me. And I think, I actually..., it makes me feel that somebody actually cares.

Jade's comments made me realize that listening means that someone cares for her.

Unexpectedly, I also realized that asking young females about education has a greater impact on them more than I had hoped. Even though I always believed the significance of education in girls' lives and of the power of storytelling as well as listening, I had not imagined that when these are combined, it can make young females like Jade feel that someone *really* cares about them.

I feel when I'm cared when other people caring about me. Hum, that can be there from teachers, stuff, peers, other young females, hum parents, cousins, family, all that...I feel I'm cared when people are caring about me. Hum, sometimes, I'm not gonna a lot...I don't feel cared because some of the stuff here they take what we say and they just dust it off like they don't even care. (...) You know I feel cared when I feel good about myself.

I listen to her and she continues:

Hum, [took a deep sigh] sometimes when I get deprived, back on education thing, when I get deprived from my education, I feel that people up top do not care. Because they are not trying, they get the other units education, but they don't get us education. And I feel like they don't care, because they are depriving us of our education. So I just think that if you know we just had some education here, I would be straight. I really would. And just....cause young females, they'd probably, not saying the dumbest but young females are like the most gender deprived of education. Because they either dropout of school, because they are pregnant, they dropped out of school because they..., I know a friend, now she dropped out of school just cause she was in 9th grade and she was in high school

so she could drop out of school. Hum... or the mothers, older females, they are on drugs so young females have to take care of their siblings so that they can't go to school. Hum... or they are in places like this they get deprived of their education. Things like that.

Jade thinks as she talks, as if she is talking to herself and trying to find an answer to a question she had asked herself.

So, that's why I say that a lot of... as a matter of fact, I'm putting this in my poem, cause I just realized that. That's why young females are not as smart as people think. Because especially young BLACK females you know their mom, they're on drug, they are sleeping around with this man, then their daughters have to take care of their siblings, have to wake up in the morning and [took a deep sigh] feed their younger siblings and it's just too much for them so that they're like, oh, freak it. I'm not going to school. And some of them just drop out because of their own drugs, and some of them fail so much, and some of them are pregnant, it's a whole chain of problems. So, I just think you know, if we just could, these girls these young females something to look for, it would just be so much better, like in the schools, I don't know what... I'm really gonna ponder on this tonight but I don't know what would take for people to get to school, to keep going to school, but it has to be something that they'll look forward to, to make them wanna go to school.

There is a lot to explain how her self-reflection came to her. She was adopted when she was little. I never asked her about her early childhood experiences or why she was adopted, but she sometimes mentioned that her anger problems were mainly from things that happened in the past. The deprivation of education that she mentions is not an exaggerated expression. When I first visited the facility where Jade and Adoncia were placed, there was no fulltime teacher, while the other unit—the unit for their male counterparts—had a few fulltime teachers who covered core courses. The girls' unit received less than 10 hours per week in the subject area of math and language arts. As an

aside, a few months later the facility found a fulltime teacher, and the girls in the unit were pleased with the change.

I was told that few teachers wanted to come to teach troubled girls. This reason was also known to the girls in the unit. The girls had to accept insufficient instruction time and the fact that few people wanted to work with them. Both facts make Jade feel that no one cared for her. She recalls that few people have come to her with questions regarding education. What this meant to her was that few people have cared about her, her dreams, and her goals. Giving voices to young females is important. What questions one asks to young females is equally important.

In the response to the same question, Adoncia states:

I feel that it's about time that somebody actually care about special needs, BED people because it's like we are always get pushed aside like nobody even you know cares about us. They just wanna stay us away from regular kids. And so I'm just happy that somebody actually took the time and just come to ask.

Young females such as Jade and Adoncia may not talk about anything relating to their disability in everyday conversation unless they are explicitly asked. This does not necessarily mean that their lived experiences have nothing to do with their disability; they certainly have lived under particular social and political conditions where their material environments were arranged by the particular disability labels they were given. For example, they were served in a facility offering intensive mental health treatment for high risk youth and adolescents. Adoncia was also receiving special education services under the category of behavioral/emotional disability (BED). My participants also live in



another sociopolitical context, namely, the juvenile justice system that organizes another set of material environments for the girls. As the responses from Jade and Adoncia illustrate, their voices are given to me as a researcher who desires to know their educational and lived experiences based on their disability status and its intersection with other social categories. They are clearly aware of what I as researcher want to understand from them. As young female learners facing multiple life challenges, they show me a broader social context in which they have been living. They let me see a range of barriers and conflicts with which they have had to cope on a daily basis regardless of their disability status. Explicating the experience of disability is possible when understanding how they see the outer world through their own situated perspective.

### **“Make It Known”**

I learned from my participants about the significance of giving voice to young females in this particular context. The participants’ reactions to the idea of giving them voice are greater than I had expected. The significance of being there for young females with disabilities living in difficult life conditions was further confirmed by Ms. Christie, a psychiatric therapist working at the facility where Jade and Adoncia lived.

Ms. Christie is one of the individuals who showed me strong support and understanding, as well as compelling reasons for giving voices to so-called high risk adolescent females. On one occasion, I asked her if she had ever noticed unequal institutional practices in serving court-involved girls, and she responded in a straightforward manner, “Yes.” She then began to provide examples: Discriminatory referral across the juvenile justice, mental health, and school systems based on race and

gender. More access and resources for treatments and opportunities to redirect their lives are available for white girls than girls of color. More girls of color than white girls are found in the system because racism exists and permeates our society in general, and in these systems in particular. Social class is another factor. Families that are better off can afford and receive more services and treatments. Girls with fewer resources continue to be underserved and are likely to be discharged or “age-out” of the child welfare system upon reaching the age of 16, 17, or 18. When unprepared with supportive transition plans, girls, even though they are resilient and capable, are likely to be susceptible to unsatisfactory outcomes. Additionally, girls of color have to do more to receive the same attention, treatments, and opportunities as white girls do. Yet, beyond race or class, girls in general are underserved. Programs usually accommodate the needs of young males and provide more to them than young females. Ms. Christie stated clearly that sexism exists in any process within the institutional practices and continues to damage girls and women.

She added, however, “Being a white woman, I cannot know what it really is like to be a woman of color and live in this patriarchal society.” She encourages her interns coming from racial minority backgrounds to talk with girls in the unit about what they have gone through as women of color because it helps the girls here know that they are not alone. It also helps the girls realize that they have opinions. Being silenced too long, many girls at multiple margins may have to be reminded again and again that their stories are worthy of being heard.

To Ms. Christie, working with court-involved young females with disabilities on a daily basis is witnessing how the social and material consequences of oppressive social practices toward young females were manifested in their complex and profound needs. Yet, at the same time, she acknowledges that it is the girls who really can tell us what it is like to continue to be isolated, unheard, and misunderstood. She assured me of the importance of giving voices to young females at multiple margins by saying, “Make the invisible come into sight, make it known, and reveal what is unfair.” Many court-involved young females live in the social, material, and political conditions that prompt the profound remark that Ms. Christie, who works with them very closely, makes.

### **The Systems of Disempowerment**

As Jade and Adoncia portrayed, their everyday challenges reflect social, political, and historical struggles of girls and women in the larger society and are shaped by the power-ridden social structure that reproduces various forms of oppressive social practices. A testimonial from Ms. Christie, who works with high risk adolescent females with disabilities on a daily basis, assured me of the importance of evaluating institutional practices from the viewpoint of my participants. Important tasks, then, are to understand and explicate (a) how silencing the voices of young females with disabilities in the juvenile justice system is likely to occur, and (b) how the negative ramifications of silencing their voices are manifested in their educational experiences.

To enter the research context in order to understand the social conditions of young females with disabilities in the juvenile justice system was to see the political relations of research production and institutional practices. The fact that young females in the

juvenile justice system remain the most misunderstood student population in the American educational system is illustrated by my difficulty in recruiting participants for this study. The prioritization by social institutions of particular modes of knowledge created the structure and the language that legitimates their own value systems as disciplinary knowledge. The institutionalized values simultaneously produce multi-levels of structural and interpersonal constraints that hold back the voices of young females at multiple margins. When examining institutional practices more closely, the existence of thick doors that shut out the voices of young females becomes noticeable. The negative ramifications of silencing their voices also become apparent.

***The Institutionalized Values that Determine “Problems”***

The first phase of this study, a period of approximately six months, was characterized by tremendous difficulties in recruiting participants. I had not expected recruitment to be easy because participants whom I planned to invite were young females being served in juvenile correctional facilities, and they are defined as a particularly vulnerable population of research subjects. However, I had not realized just how difficult it would be to gain access to this specific population. The complexity of obtaining approval for conducting a research study from correctional agencies was overwhelming. My first reaction to the difficulty was hopelessness and a sense of uncertainty about the worth of pursuing this research topic. When access continued to be limited, I began feeling discouraged. Why is it this challenging to be able to listen to what young females in the juvenile justice system have to say about their educational and everyday experiences mediated by their social identities? The roadblocks to access caused

questions to occur to me: How many professional debates on social problems plaguing young females in their pursuit of education had taken place without those who actually had experienced them? How many female students who failed or were expelled had to exit without telling someone what it was like to leave their school behind? Where are their unsaid voices? Would I be able to find them?

During the recruitment period, I approached a number of public and community agencies in several states to recruit young females who might be interested in taking part in this study. Some individuals in those agencies showed their interest and willingness to assist me. Those individuals included probation officers, managers, counselors, and lead youth workers in community youth programs. They shared their concerns about the lack of attention and the limited resources for empowering youth in schools and in the community. The focus of this study on the young female population sometimes prompted people's attention to young females served in their own programs or agencies. Unless called to authorities' notice, young females often remain overlooked. When reminded, agency personnel would say, "Oh, yeah. Our girls have a lot to say. They will tell you whatever you want to know!"

DeVault (1999) suggests that silencing does not only refer to quieting, but it also means that one's voice is censored, suppressed, marginalized, trivialized, excluded, ghettoized, or discounted. This means that girls and women do not necessarily have to shut their mouths to become and remain silent. In everyday life, many young women may have tried to let their voices be heard. In the patriarchal society, however, the louder young females' voices are, the more likely people are to perceive them as being

emotional. In this society, being emotional is a culprit and often is discounted as “drama,” and there is little worth to being involved in somebody else’s drama. Ears that are culturally trained and scientifically endorsed are likely to attend to masculine scripts and are not accustomed to listening to locally situated, emotional-ridden voices that presumably lack logic and rationality. If we are unaware of the cultural practice of silencing non-masculine voices, the voices of young females may continue to be ignored.

Meetings with people who were interested in giving the voices of their young female clients to this study were encouraging. At the end of such sessions, they told me that they would bring my research proposal to a board meeting or to program representatives and ask for approval. Most administrators of those agencies, however, did not approve the project.

I also contacted a representative in the research unit of a governmental correctional agency in a state that operates major facilities for court-involved youth. I expressed my interest in conducting a dissertation research study with young females with disabilities in the juvenile justice system, which would include those who were placed in correctional facilities or court-ordered long-term residential facilities in the community. Approximately two months after I submitted a research proposal I received a notification of disapproval. While the agency provided me a local, short-term correctional setting as an alternative research site, the limited access made it difficult to arrange ongoing research activities there.

The final notification from the agency representative did not identify any possible risks to participants as the reason for the disapproval. In fact, during the two months of

the review process, I was asked to specify where I would find comparison samples and how the multi-methodologies described in the proposal would be much different from “interviews.” I was also asked to specify benefits that the agency would *directly* receive from this study. The greatest benefit to the agency that I specified was participants’ voices as a set of new knowledge for the development of services relevant to their everyday life needs and concerns. The final notification from the representative stated that although the agency recognized the importance of the kind of research, which they called “preliminary” due to its descriptive and qualitative nature, the agency did not find practical and direct benefit for its use in advocacy or program evaluation without an extensive quantitative follow-up. The letter of disapproval also stated that the agency tended to rely on standard educational program evaluation tools to examine issues involved in education services under the operation of the agency. The rationale for rejecting the proposal implied that in order for a research proposal to be acceptable, it must incorporate specific language, methods, and possible outcomes on which the agency would place its practical values. A qualitative mode of inquiry was not conceptualized as anything beyond preliminary research. The institutional imagination limited types and ranges of practicability, which in turn affected what knowledge claim they would value.

The response to this study taken by the agency contrasted with those of several other educational agencies where the primary concerns for approving my proposal were based on possible practical difficulties, such as obtaining parental consent and conflict between students’ instructional time and time allocation for interviews. Those agencies acknowledged that the complex needs of female students facing multiple life challenges

were likely to remain unattended and forgotten. When the concerns raised were cleared through correspondence, the research proposal was accepted.

Because the difficulty in recruiting participants remained a major hurdle for a prolonged time period, seeking opinions and suggestions concerning reasons and solution for the difficulty emerged as a dimension of the fieldwork. Opinions from some people working in or with the justice system indicated that the agency's stance was not unique to this study. There was a consensus that besides confidentiality and safety issues involved with research on youth in correctional facilities, correctional agencies in general probably worried about how young detainees would represent the correctional services they were receiving (E. Bacon, personal communication, July 24, 2006). Another point of consensus was that agencies would not want to take any obvious political stance by committing their resources to a particular research project of this sort (E. Zogry, personal communication, September 25, 2006). A common alternative route taken by other researchers was to move on, modify the research population, or change the mode of inquiry and types of data to meet the criteria of the agency (B. Smith, personal communication, August 21, 2006.) The strength of consensus on this topic helped me to imagine barriers against which researchers who desire to break the silence of young females behind the bar traditionally have fought.

Illustrating the difficulty in recruiting participants is not intended to defend my work or to criticize the decision by the agency itself. Rather, this example highlights the institutionalization of values that set standards of the practicability, expediency, and relevance of research purpose and finding, which, in turn, shapes disciplinary knowledge



that guides everyday practice. The favoritism and prioritization of a particular mode of inquiry or the pursuit of statistical rigor in claiming practical value must be a common practice in social institutions. Official and unofficial communications with several professionals in the juvenile justice and mental health systems across geographic regions also indicated that the reliance of correctional agency on scientific justification might also demonstrate institutional compliance to the general administrative expectation to use money wisely. This may have resulted in prioritizing political demands and strategizing means to demonstrate the goodness of the institutional practices by means of outcome-based or research-driven evidence.

I find this inclination problematic for several reasons. First, when political values are institutionalized, it is likely to discount knowledge claims that can undermine the institutional authority and its practice. For example, in order to tackle long-lasting problems in the juvenile and criminal justice systems, such as disproportionate minority confinement (DMC) or overrepresentation of youth of color with or without disabilities in the juvenile justice system, it may be necessary to cross examine juvenile offenders concerning how and when they perceive or receive discriminatory attitude or treatment toward them. However, if responses from the juvenile offenders are found to be inconvenient on the side of the institution, the political power of the institutional values may dismiss any undesirable findings, even though those findings can suggest possible actions and solutions to these problems. If quantitative data or sophisticated statistical analyses matter in finding solutions to those problems, they should have been solved by now because they have been documented for years using these strategies.

Second, quantification of responses from individuals may inform grand narratives, but it can depersonify individuals' voices and disguise the sense of urgency and the depth of concerns expressed by them. Mr. Eric Zogry, Office of the Juvenile Defender in North Carolina, provided me with information during a meeting regarding a newly established bill that took effect in October 2007 in Guilford County, NC. Under the new law, judges are required to determine whether or not a juvenile appearing in court needs to be subject to physical restraint by shackling, which refers to handcuffing the juvenile to chains. Juveniles appearing in Guilford county court can no longer be handcuffed unless conditions require doing so. According to available news sources (Jones, 2007; Legal Aid North Carolina, 2007) earlier this year, Legal Aid attorneys had challenged the use of shackles on a 14-year-old girl who was described by a source as a mentally challenged. The girl was facing theft charges but she also was suffering from sexual abuse, which involved the use of handcuffs. The challenge by the Legal Aid attorneys was denied once by judges who concluded that the best practice was to continue the traditional practices, the use of shackling.

The new bill passed and without sponsorship by a person who was concerned about issues facing youth of color in the juvenile justice system, it would not have been passed. Mr. Zogry noted that the person who sponsored this bill was an African American female House representative who must have been keenly aware of and able to relate to the terrifying struggles that many young females of color who are brought into the system have endured. This example also demonstrates that in the case of youth and adolescents in the juvenile justice system who are most likely to be voiced over by adults, unless

adults who have the power to problematize and politicize personal struggles of those who have little power to control their lives, significant changes are unlikely to happen.

Third, the importance of taking the perspective of young females or youth and adolescents who are brought into the juvenile justice system in general reflects my recognition of the need to examine existing educational practices and policies, presumably resulting in referring a large number of students to the court system. My field activities, including reviews of student files, site visits, observations, and interviews have revealed that principally, anecdotes or narratives documented do not reflect the viewpoints of students who are disciplined by their schools and/or charged. “What happened” and “why it happened” are almost always documented from the side of teachers, school personnel, school administrators, or other involved adults. Special education related documents such as functional behavioral assessments (FBAs) and behavior intervention plans (BIPs) used by the schools that my participants attend also are not designed to incorporate the viewpoints of students in developing and implementing individualized plans. For example, a FBA instrument utilized by a school where one of my participants attended included the question, “What is the student’s purpose/need for initiating these target behaviors?” Her target behaviors were identified in two areas, including verbal abuse and skipping. The items listed under this question included: (a) avoid a demand/request, (b) avoid an activity/task, (c) avoid a person, (d) avoid school, (e) gain attention from an adult/peer, (f) gain power, and (g) other (specify). While the use of these words can magnify the noncompliant, manipulative, or uncooperative images of a student who is under evaluation and conceptualize her as the

cause of the problem, these words do not seem to enable evaluators to interrogate situational factors contributing to the particular behavior of the students fairly and effectively. In fact, during interviews, the participant indicated that her difficulty in understanding materials, negative remarks by peers and teachers, and peer pressure likely were the primary reasons for her problem behaviors. However, the assessment identified gaining power as the purpose. Consequently, the interventions planned and implemented did not adequately address the factors identified by her.

I talked with my participants about why they think many girls are now involved in the juvenile justice system. While their thoughts and opinions vary in their examples, they have revealed underlying problems common to them. Andre responded in this way:

Because really, to half these little girls out here, it just ain't them getting in trouble, it's PEOPLE getting them in trouble. But some judges, they don't listen to their sides' story. They listen to what the PO say, they listen to what parents say. How are you going to listen to what parents say in and the parents wasn't there when we didn't. Well, that's how I feel.

Andre recalls she was treated unfairly by her teachers several times when she was in a public middle school. She told me her side of a story about an incident in a computer class that caused her to be suspended from school for several days.

Well, at a point of time when I was in North middle, one day I was in a computer class, and wasn't nobody doing their work. Everybody was talking. And I started talking. And then again, he [a teacher] gave me a word searching. And I said I don't like doing word searches. And he said, the teacher said you ain't gotta do it but you gotta be quiet. I said, "Why I gotta be quiet while other kids don't have to be quiet." So other kids kept talking.... And I said, "Well, I'm about to go, let me go to the office", and he said, "You can go to the office." So I got up and I went to the office and he wrote me up.

Andre did not sound as if she was resentful. She said that it happened in the past so she tried not to think about it anymore. This is how she copes with her everyday struggles. She easily admitted that she received several days of suspension because she was not doing what she was supposed to do and talked back to the teacher. However, what matters is that Andre was not the only one who was not engaging in classroom activities. I reviewed her files and what was documented is almost identical to what Andre told me. One portion that was missing from the report was the facts from Andre's side.

Andre's story reminded me of Michel, a 12-year-old African American student who was attending to an alternative school. During classroom observations at the school, I noticed that she and her female teacher had a hostile relationship, or at least, I did not feel that the teacher treated the girl fairly. This does not mean that I did not see Michel misbehaving in classrooms. It was rather easy to imagine how Michel had challenged her teachers in her regular school because she often refused to work on tasks, was distracted easily, and frequently talked back to her teachers and school personnel. In fact, I was informed by a program manager of the alternative school that she would not be cooperative or would just be playing during interviews. However, she was always cooperative and I felt respected whenever I talked with her.

Things that worried me during my fieldwork at the school related to the way in which the female teacher interacted with Michel. For example, I visited the school to observe a morning class. I observed Michel for the last 15 minutes of a first period class and was going to observe her second period class. After the first period class, the female teacher glanced at me and suddenly asked Michel why she had been quiet that morning.

The teacher then asked her why she did not sing or dance as she usually does. The teacher sounded very cynical and kept asking Michel “You don’t sing this morning? Sing or dance like you always do. Michel, why don’t you dance when I say you can?” It sounded as if the teacher was telling me that the girl whom I was observing was a totally different person when I was not there. The male counselor was standing between the female teacher and Michel. He did not say anything, but he laughed when the female teacher told Michel to dance. The teacher continued telling the girl, “Sing, dance” as if she was provoking Michel. Michel did not say anything. She looked at me and I noticed an embarrassed look on her face. Then, the teacher suddenly started belly-dance like dancing, shaking her hips perfectly like young hip-hop singers appearing in music TV programs. Michel finally left the classroom, saying nothing. I had no idea of what the teacher’s dancing was for. I could not tell whether she wanted to show me, Michel, or the male counselor how good a dancer she was or whether there was any other purpose. The female teacher was laughing at Michel as she was walking away from the room. I did not understand why Michel was treated this way just because she was quiet.

On another occasion, I was observing Michel in a computer class after an interview with her. She was the only student in the class that day. Michel started working on a composition using Microsoft Word. While she was typing some words slowly, the same female teacher came into the classroom. As soon as the teacher came in, Michel stopped typing and deleted everything. The teacher found no words or sentences on a computer screen, and so asked Michel if she did not have anything to write about her family. The teacher continued, “Don’t you have any good memory with your parents?

Isn't there any happy memory with your family members?" She sounded very sarcastic. Michel responded to the teacher, "I don't want you to know." The teacher reacted to Michel negatively. "Okay, do whatever you want. I'll just give you a grade for what you have," she spat out the words as she was leaving the room. A review of Michel's file indicated her difficulties in the home. I had to question the teacher's sensitivity to the life circumstances of her students. A review of Michel's juvenile records indicated that most disciplinary actions made at the alternative school involved that female teacher. However, Michel's version of the facts—what happened—were not documented.

These examples with the girls are just some of the incidents during my fieldwork where I witnessed students being treated unfairly and poorly. Nonetheless, few opportunities to interrogate students' versions of the facts are currently available. Surely, my female participants have misbehaved in particular circumstances for certain reasons. However, those reasons have not been explored fairly or taken seriously.

### ***The Social Practices that Create the Culture of Protection and Survival***

My participants expressed that when the one-sided view of the institutions ignores the girls' viewpoints, it makes them feel misunderstood. Living in today's society as a young female it is difficult when they constantly remain overlooked, unheard, and misunderstood. Perhaps the most negative ramification of their voices being unheard is that they continue to be treated unfairly and poorly based on the built-in assumptions attached to their social categories such as race, gender, class, disability status, and delinquency status. Justifiably, the sense of being misunderstood held by the girls has

negative effects on their own ideas of who they are, their perceived opportunity structure, and their actions.

Renee, a 17-year-old African American participant, is an animated, open-minded young woman who continues to impress me with the way she observes the world from her situated perspective and experiential knowledge. She almost always has responded to my questions promptly and has done so with many examples that have helped me to understand why she thinks in the particular ways she does. However, when asked about how she thinks about being a young woman in today's society, she had to ponder:

Hummm....I don't know. I can't really answer that one.... I mean it's kinda hard, cause people treat like you are like female, you are supposed to act a certain way and all this and they stereotype you before they get to know you. So it's kinda hard being a young female out here, and... people like to try to and stereotype you before they get to know you. So it's like, "Oh you are lady, you are supposed to act...." You don't know how I act cause you do not know me. But, then again it's easy cause like I guess females....I don't know how to put this in a sentence, let me see....

It may seem that my question below led the resulting response from Renee. However, considering my participants' age and their positionality as teenagers who may not have been given ample opportunities to reflect their social relations with others and the society within the larger social formations, I thought that it would be a disservice if I did not provide her with something to encourage her to explore her thoughts.

K: Do you think... I am sorry, I am not trying to interrupt what you are saying, but do you think race, ethnicity, social class, or...



Humhum THAT'S got a lot to do with it. Cause they see, ah she is black girl, she act like that, she ghetto, and all this all that but it's not. Just cause I am black, Don't take me for ghetto. Don't take me for rude. Don't take me for this or nothing. I mean we are just same the people, we are just different color. And then they see a white girl, oh yeah, she high class... NO. So I think color got a lot to do with it cause they stereotype you before they know you.

From Renee's viewpoint, one-sided practices both in the juvenile justice and school systems are obvious. She particularly feels that a one-sided view of *problems* and racial stereotyping continue to weigh down young females who are forced to carry heavier baggage than they can handle. When negative stereotypes attached to particular social categories work as heuristic devices, they can make people come to judgment easily, without making any efforts to question or challenge the hidden power structure that rationalizes differential treatments toward people who historically are perceived *others*. Renee portrays how girls, especially girls in the juvenile justice system, are marked with multiple negative stereotypes while being misunderstood.

They [girls in the juvenile justice system] just like everybody else, out here, except they just go through things. I go through things that make me do other thing. You know I'm saying, there ain't no difference. Just cause they had been in trouble, everybody else has been in trouble. So I mean you can't look at this like, oh they bad, they hard headed, they gangsta, no, it's not that. It's just that we go through things and you go through something. It's goin' to make you have reactions to what you are going through, cause when I fight it's because I go through something, or somebody does something to me, but it does not make me different from other girls. It still makes me the same it's just that they don't know what I go through. And they just can't label me as a bad girl cause I had been in trouble.

Other participants resonate with Renee. They give accounts that support Renee's statements. Monica, a 14-year-old African American participant who is a close friend of

Renee and attends the same high school as Renee explains that many school-age girls are likely to encounter circumstances that compel them to react in particular ways, which in turn may result in being referred to the court system. It is the consequence they have to pay for their actions, but they have reasons.

Cause you know, that's your bag. It's like....it's like when you are in school, girls are so....[Renee: Slick] Yeah, like that very slick, like they try to jump you or they try to bring a knife to school, try to cut you stuff this. So, you gotta defend yourself. [Renee: They think cause you a girl you won't fight.] You know what I'm saying that and then they look at you like you did wrong but you are just protecting yourself or whatever like that. So, that's why I think it's more girls, cause I just think girls have more problems than boys do anyway. They just fight more.

During another interview, she talked more about school climate where she perceives the one-sided way of handling incidents by the school systems without interrogating particular incidents within the broader social and cultural contexts.

Some of girls are involved in it cause they don't care. But some girls are just brought into it. Because you know like we had an incident. You know like one girl was fighting another girl. And another girl jumps in. She just brought herself into it. Or like somebody comes up to me and hits me. So I was, therefore, I am brought to it. So, some people... just don't care, some people are just brought into it. Cause they have to defend itself. And then it goes both ways like, well if she gets charged I get charged. But you are just defending itself. So, it can go both ways but I think most girls in there....well.... not... I'm gonna say it's equal. Cause some of them, don't really care and half of them, just brought into it. And therefore they got the label on them, like well, like simple affray or simple assault, but they hit you first and you can't just walk away from somebody hitting you, so but they don't look at it like that. They think, look at it as, Well, you should walk away. But I think they should put themselves in our shoes. Like, if I hit you, just go and walk away from me?

You know, like when the officers tried to like you know I got the fight last year when officers came in to try to arrest me, and they tell me I was wrong and took the charges out of me. I felt like, well if I hit you, you going slam me down and

you are not gonna walk away. So I think before they try to press the charge they should put themselves in our shoes. I mean I can understand getting some type of consequences cause you did fight, and you could have got off and walked away. But I think the person who swung first or the person who provoked it most, they should get the charge.

I have heard similar statements from other girls such as Lavon, a 15-year-old African American participant, and Allison, a 16-year-old white participant, who told me that their involvement in fighting in school was their reaction to insults and/or physical or verbal threats toward them. For example, during an interview with Lavon, who has had a number of school disciplines, I asked her how she perceives school fairness toward her.

No, 'cause they, they [school personnel] charged us for the fight, and they do not do the girls and the girls started the fight. They suspended the girls but they charged us for the fight. They suspended us and charged us.

Listening to the female participants, I have felt that it may be true that girls fight now more than ever. This, however, does not mean that they have become vicious. In response to a question concerning girls' involvement in the juvenile justice system, Adoncia stated that something has been changing, which results in more girls being referred to the court system. She said that it is difficult to put her thoughts in words but stated:

.... I think rules. Like... Hum...girls are changing. But I don't think it's the girls in general. I just think the way people expect the girls is changing.

Adoncia's observation insightfully describes how young females' ever-changing reactions to existing social conditions are perceived, interpreted, and judged by people

whose gaze on young females is constantly changing, depending on the political climate of today's society.

When conversations with Adoncia and Jade touched on the difficulty of being a young female today, they responded similarly. Jade thinks:

Hum....Sometimes it can be kinda of scary because you know you think young females are getting raped. Young females are getting taken advantage of. Young females are getting deprived of education. Hum, if you think, have we ever had a female president? Have we ever had....Hum...There haven't been many female governors. Hum, you just think about things like that. Females are getting pregnant now, young females.... Hum.... it's just I mean unless you know who you are and what you are capable of, then you really don't perhaps have to have any things to worry about but if you like have low self-esteem, hum, you listen to what anybody says stuff like that, then you're gonna be in a world of mess in this world. Hum, you see a lot of young females being independent, hum because they don't have anybody to lean on, they either been raped, or hum they've been messed with or somehow that they don't wanna be with a whole bunch of people. You know what I'm saying? It's just, It's CRAZY, I mean, but for me as a young female, I think I have courage throughout this world to do some things. Because I have to realize this world does not owe me anything. So, hum, I'm just trying to go along with flow, I know who my source is. God and I believe that you work a lotta things out as long as you have someone on your side you will be all right. And hum, I just think that for me in this world I just hope that life doesn't end soon. I mean everyone is gonna die one day but I just hope mine doesn't end soon. Hum, but this world can be scary sometimes, you know. Terrorists, hum, [took a deep sigh] just a lotta things going on in this world right now that you gotta be careful for.

Adoncia echoes in the way in which she sees the danger:

It's hard, because there's all kinds of people out here like sex offenders, hum, rapists stuff like that and so you never know who's gonna pop up in your life and sexually abuse you, molest you, or rape you, so you gotta watch out for the boys you hang around or the girls you hang around, cause some of the girls might be..... you know, not very good or stuff, so young females, they have to watch out for a lot stuff. That's why I feel that you gotta be tough to survive the real world because the few .... You can't survive.....I feel that if you can survive in here and it's like the most dramatic people in here [the current placement]. That you won't

be able to live out in the real world. That's why I'm trying to be TOUGHEN up cause I was tough out of school, when I was, I mean, when I was in school. Like... (...) And like, one girl hit me and I pushed her and we just started fighting or whatever. And when I got suspended and I started crying, so.

Adoncia told me that she started carrying a knife before she turned 10 and felt that she had to do so for some time because:

You never know who's gonna come around the corner and grab you and stuff. So, I did for my protection.... Because I was away from my family, with people that I don't know.

Like Monica, Jade and Adoncia portray unsafe living environments in immediate contexts in which young females reside. Their comments also indicate that for many young females living in difficult life conditions, this world is focused on protection and survival, as few people are on their side to understand what they go through, relate to them, and speak for and with them. Like most female participants, Adoncia has suffered traumatic incidents, which is considered to be associated with her current diagnoses among which are post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and a mood disorder. She also has received special education services under the category of EBD since she was in an elementary school. She may be characterized as a typical female delinquent as far as her profile is concerned. She has had a history of running away, truancy, and disorderly conduct. Nothing may make her stand out as a "female delinquent" if her profile alone determines who she is and what she needs. However, listening to her life stories makes me feel grateful that she still is alive and striving.

Adonica was adopted at an early age. One time, she showed me her notebook which included her pictures and biography. I asked myself what it would take for a child to create a notebook for her search for a foster family. She identified that living in a group home was never easy as a child. This also was shared by several participants, such as Lavon, a 15-year-old African American participant and Nicole, a 14-year-old African American participant, who were living in a group home during my fieldwork period. Being away from home is to live with people one does not know. It can compel one to become tough and stay tough in the home, too. Some girl participants have also told me that being involved in the juvenile justice system makes them unsure of their immediate future because their future placement is in the judge's hands. They said that this makes them feel anxious and act up as their court days approach.

Sometimes I did not know what to say to my participants when they shared their stories with me. I often felt disappointed with my own inability to find right words to let them know how much I appreciated their openness to tell me their painful memories and experiences. Even knowing that the act of listening itself is of great importance, without having tangible services or treatments to provide, sitting down and talking with them often made me feel powerless. However, I have gradually learned from them that having someone who listens to them was what they needed most in the midst of their struggles. They needed someone who just listens to them without judging them.

***“It’s a Whole Big Misunderstanding”***

Adoncia’s testimonial of carrying a knife as a child may be noteworthy as it is described by Monica as a real threat to others in the school context. Yet, Adoncia felt as a

child that she had to do so to protect her from any possible danger. These two examples could make it sound as if girls in trouble at home bring their problems to school with them, and others must protect themselves in the school, which is essentially safe. The female participants describe a different picture. During an interview, Allison, a 16-year-old white participant elaborates how difficult it is being a young female inside and outside of the school context.

I think that I should be respected and things like boys. Boys are so disrespectful. They can be hollering at a girl, or stuff like that.

K: Do you, do you..... why do you think so? Some boys are..., of course, there are some boys who show respect to girls but... usually....are boys so disrespectful?

I think it's because of their friends and they wanna act bad in front of their friends. And...they just.... I don't know..... but have you been around like boys like that, like they try to talk all this trash to you in front of somebody and then when they get by themselves they are like, "Oh, can I do this for you?" [She said this with a lower tone like boys talk] and actually they talk to you instead of, "Hey, come here girl" [she said this with a lower tone like boys talk] and stuff like that. I mean seriously, I can't stand when a boy's like talking about the girl, talking about how her butt looks or something like that. I cannot stand that. Cause I think that it is so wrong. I really do. Or just to see a girl and smack on her butt, boy, and smack me on my butt, I smack on his face [She said this as she punched her palm with her fist]. But he'll not never do that again.

I laughed aloud as I was listening to Allison changing the tone of her voice to portray how boys act differently. I again asked her if she thinks that young females living in today's society can be targets for being disrespected by boys.

Yeah because..... hum well not all the time but sometimes, yeah because you can be in a room with the boy 5 minutes and you didn't do nothing to him and I guess he gets mad at you because you didn't do nothing with him and he goes to tell his friends, oh she did this and this and this for me, and they did nothing and there they are, sitting there, getting called HOs and HOs and HOs cause they slept with, okay, okay, yeah cause okay say that boy went off and said that hum she did this for hum and she didn't even do nothing and there she is, sitting down one day and somebody come by her, calling her ho and she even didn't know what he is talking about and she get disrupted because they are sitting there, everybody calling her ho and she sitting there like what are you all talking about and she gets angry because that's not right. And like, like, a girl can sleep with one person and be called ho but boys can sleep with like three girls at a time and not be called nothing. That is wrong.

K: Yeah, that is wrong. I agree. I agree.

That is wrong.

K: So..., do you think being young female in this society is not easy?

No, it's not. I just don't see how a boy can get so much respect for sleeping with so many girls and girls get disrespected by sleeping with one or two. I don't get it. I can't stand it. That.... and if you .... I don't know, if you maybe, I don't know, a girl can be held back because maybe cause I don't know...somebody said some about her and everybody.... I don't know. It just crazy. I just.... I don't like how .... Like I said..... It just .... disturbs me, I just can't stand it. I'll never stand it. And .... a boy....let me see how I can out this..... hum.... A man can be....I've seen this happen before. This woman be beaten up and you can tell it. And a man can see it, I mean like police and he said he didn't do nothing and .... and she....just has to be beaten. Do you understand what I'm saying? Or, he can say that she hit him and she did nothing. And they get away with it. But I don't like the whole sex part. This is one thing that gets me ....

K: Mmm. Do you think this...hum.... unfairness to girls can be happening also in school?

YEAH, IT DOES happen in school. Yeah, like somebody can say that this girl slept with him and yeah maybe it was true. But this other boys can say so much



and so much and so much about the girl and she gets called ho and it's just not right to me. Cause they can have how many people whatever on they thing and then this girl got one on her and then I just can't stand it. I JUST CAN'T STAND IT. And they, it like make them look good. I don't see how it makes them look good. It's nasty. And I don't see how they.... they get credit for it. And ...we get cussed out and called nasty things and it's bad. It's bad. They get credit for it. Have you seen rappers? They .... they be calling women HOs and B-I-T-C-Hs and talking about slapping them and stuff. That's not right. That's hm-um.

K: And... then how, for instance, if... for instance, your friend or you are, for instance, called ho, how being called ho and being discounted can affect your school learning?

How....

Maybe not want to come to school. Stay out of school because you are being picked on. And my boyfriend, it wasn't the same situation but he didn't wanna come to school because all these people were taking disadvantages of him because he wouldn't fight them because it was maybe 4 or 5 of them, and if he said something to one of them all of them was gonna hit him and they always picked on him and he said he stopped going to school because of it. And like, I know I wanted to quit school before because of people saying stuff about me. I know this one girl was crying one time because she.... everybody was calling her ho and she just didn't wanna come to school. And people were just picking, picking, and picking until people... they don't know what they are talking about. And it really hurts somebody inside and they just don't let it show and sometimes it even causes somebody to kill themselves. Sometimes and really it's not .... I don't think .... I think if somebody is being joked on in school, I think it should be something big cause that's the reason why..... and the teachers....., I don't know if they think it's funny and .... and it's not because..... It's crazy and it's wrong that somebody get picked on so much that they can't even come to school.

Allison's testimonials are important and informative in many respects. Not surprisingly, the institutional silencing of the voices of young females has created particular cultural themes shared by the participants. School is not a haven. As Allison indicates, the female participants perceive that schools, administrators, and teachers are unwilling to take any actions to ameliorate concerns raised by students. They all agree

that their schools do not worry about their students but about people from the district assessment office. They perceive the only issue that matters in schools is testing, and that teachers and administrators push students who are most in need away from the school. The female participants feel that they are compelled to live with the school culture of competition and survival. School culture has shaped their mindset that if you decide to come to school, you have to watch your back. You have to be tough and you must protect yourself because the school is not going to help you survive.

Allison's testimonials also reveal the tremendous effects of cultural imagery—how young females are represented in various kinds of mass-media productions—the devaluation of young women, especially women of color. Jade also reiterates the influences the cultural imagery has on young females' ideas of who they are, what they should look like, what they are supposed to have, and by what materials they are recognized and valued. When Jade and I were talking about how race and class, besides gender, can affect young females' perceptions of what it is like to be a young female in today's society, she said that it is not easy for young females, especially young females of color, to respect themselves because they are likely to have low self-esteem, which in turn causes them not to care.

K: Do you think mass media or any information from TV or videos or books..., do you think...

YES, it has a big.... When I say big, you know I'm talking about gigantic effect on young females. If you see hum, BET, MTV all that stuff, you see little half naked girls, gyrating and stuff like that. It's...it's crazy. And young girls say, oh she looks cute on there, oh she just looks cute right there. They think they can do that because that's what they see on TV. And the popular people are around

there, so they see, oh they're getting popular because they have so, I mean, they think they can do it because, I mean, it's just...it's a whole big MISUNDERSTANDING. Yes, it's a whole big misunderstanding. And, I mean, I just think that the media does have a big, when I say big, BIG influence. Probably about 85% influence on why young females are the way they are now. And I'm telling you the media keeps on exploiting and doing like it is now, it probably gonna be 90-95% by the next four years that it will be on young females...

During another interview, Jade also elaborated on the degradation of young females. Jade had told me that being a young female in our society is not easy. I asked her if there was any point in the past when she felt that being a young female was not difficult.

Hum..... not that I really know of. Because you know hum sometimes you know we do get some lead way with some things. Hum like, like they say woman first and everything You know what I'm saying. And you know I think we get lead way with some things but politics and hum and sports and when it really comes down to the real stuff, women are actually put last. Because we are kinda lowered, you see if you listen to some music now and women are being degraded. And I think that it's not right. You know you hear, hum you listen to music and you hear the men call each other, the women, they're bitches, they're hos, hum, we just get really put down.

I asked her how and when she, as a teenager, became aware of the huge effects of cultural imagery on young females.

Hmmmm, I can be honest, it was one time when I was in 8th grade and one of my teachers, (...) he mentioned that you know we be like the boys call the girls their bitches. And he was like, that's not cool. Because we are females we put out a lot hum...shit we don't have to. And for us...for the rappers and singers to be called on us bitches, it's really degrading. And I started thinking about that. A little bit down the road from when he told me that. And I was like you know as females, listen to these music, (...) you know we sing the music, and we probably don't even understand what we are singing. You know and if we actually rewind the lyrics and listen to them, and you find out that talking about oh, that's my babe mama, that's my ho, that's my bitch and it doesn't, it doesn't...really make any sense at all. (...) It was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. He was my social studies teacher. And

he told me you know the way that they degrade these women is hum unbelievable.

I then asked her how she thinks many other students heard the teacher's message in the way she did.

Yeah..., he... as a matter of fact, he said it to the class and I think a lot of people, they were listening. But they didn't really take it to their head. You know what I'm saying. They were just like, ok well...they don't really mean that, the rappers don't really mean what they say, and some of them actually do. Because why do you think they have a career to mean what they say and to earn the money, so. That's what I just...I think that's just the way things are going right now.

Through the talk with my participants about the embeddedness of cultural imagery in everyday talk and action of youth and adolescents and how it can be positively or negatively transformed through school or classroom activities, I had to wonder how many opportunities for students and teachers to think about equality and entitlement through dialectical conversations have been lost, as current classroom activities are most likely to focus on memorizing and strategizing for taking and passing tests.

As Monica emphasizes, most girl participants neither wanted to fight nor sought recognition by fighting. Rather, they reported that being suspended and being involved in fighting was the most negative school experience they have had. Yet again, their perception of schools being one-sided in their judgment—being indifferent to gender, racial, and class inequality within the schools, and being preoccupied with testing and disciplines, the economic and political dimensions of the existing school practices that

produce social polarization—gave them an enduring impression that schools do not care about their students and that they would not take their students’ concerns seriously.

Renee, among other participants, reported that negative racial, gender, and class stereotyping is really hard on young females of color because it takes the credibility of their situated perspectives away from them. The girl participants see that people always prove them wrong instead of trying to challenge their own beliefs and assumptions about race, gender, or class. It is ironic that the girl participants act on the environments that shape their actions. They do not want to be misunderstood. They do not want to continue to be degraded. That is why they try hard to prove what they can do by themselves and to protect themselves. The harder they try, the more they get in trouble.

### **The Relevance of the Girls’ Everyday Talk to the Experience of Disability**

My participants shared their perceptions and experiences of being a young female living in today’s society. In essence, having a disability does not preclude them from experiencing gendered, racialized, and classed social and cultural practices. Importantly, Allison’s accounts revealed critical aspects of school practices. She provided an implication of a gulf between how the existing literature explains why students with disabilities are likely to exit and how students with disabilities, particularly those at multiple margins, perceive huge obstacles within the school that make it difficult to come to schools without being tough. That is, scholarly and public debates generally tend to focus on the advantages and disadvantages of the current educational movement where scores on tests are conceptualized as evidence for the quality of student learning. A large volume of educational literature, particularly special education literature, has argued that

current testing-driven practices have pushed students with disabilities and those who are at risk for academic failure out of regular classrooms and/or schools. Such concerns are legitimate and very important, yet they may still fall short. When examined uncritically, the foci of the debates can erroneously signify students' inability and contain them in the framework of the ability/disability system. In turn, those debates can overshadow other critical aspects of schooling or the nature of school: School as a social institution and therefore as an epitome of the broader society of which structure reproduces the complex systems of social oppression. What social climate are schools reproducing? Many female students with disabilities may have exited because of their difficulties in learning, or they may have done so because of their own pregnancy, parenting responsibility, or economic reasons. However, their reasons for exiting school may have been more than these. We do not yet know the answer because we hardly have listened to them.

My participants have exemplified how the negative ramifications of their being silenced have been manifested in their everyday experiences, especially in educational settings and how they have coped with it. Yet another serious ramification of dismissing their voices from public discourses and educational scholarship is highlighted by Alexis, a 13-year-old African American participant. In a response to my question as to what it is like to be a young female today, Alexis remarked:

It's crazy, cause people they look for so much for you, and some people they look you know down, you know, they think you are nut, but you can become better, some people they look at you right now but see you don't have any future. But you can prove them wrong.

K: You are right. .... Why do you think this happens?

I don't know. I guess this is the way it is.

Silencing the voices of young females keeps them misunderstood. At the same time, it compels them to hold their struggles in as if doing so is their destiny.

Similarly, Andre shows her ways of dealing everyday struggles. Actually, Andre was the only participant who responded that being a young female today is not difficult.

To me, it's easy. It's easy to me. It really don't hurt me. I ain't...I've been through some rough times but I let it go by. I don't think about it. I just let it go by. I put it all behind me. I just forget it.

During interviews, Andre shared some of her life stories. She has gone through a lot. Some of those stories included how she joined a gang and got out of it. She talked to me about these as if they were not big deal to her. One day, I showed up at her class as usual to take her to another room for an interview. She approached me, smiling. I told her that I really liked to see her smiling every week. She looked at me as if she wanted to tell me something but instead she looked down, and looked at me again and told me in a low voice, "If I don't smile, everything falls off." I could not find the right words for a reply, but I sensed that she understood that I understood what she meant. She smiled at me again and told me, "Let's go for talk." We walked to the room together.

Listening to her stories often made me feel that she is a very strong young woman. One time, I asked her what she thought made her become so strong.

I know. That's what they say to me yesterday [in a girls-only group discussion]. They was like Andre, you are very strong girl and I take a whole lot stuff to the head.

K: What do you think made you such a strong lady?

My mama. Cause my mama, she's been through a whole lot stuff. And she hold it in, so you know as I look at my mama all at the same time, you can't just...you know you can just let stuff stay on your mind, you keep going, you know, going around, crying and stuff like that, so you know I'm a tough girl, I don't.., you know, I hold stuff in, let it go, let it fly, let it fly on a wing cause it ain't even worth my time

Alexis and Andre exemplified how they try to cope. They hold things in as their mothers have done. They both told me that they learn things as they look at their mothers' past, despite the fact that they have ongoing disputes and clashes with their mothers. The everyday struggles of young females at multiple margins are not only political but also historical. They left me convinced that unless we devote our ears to their voices, their struggles are carried to next generation. Any traditional educational reforms may never be able to reach out young females of next generations in meaningful and equitable ways.

**Research Question 2: To What Extent Do Adolescent Females with Disabilities Who are Involved in the Juvenile Justice System Consider Disability as Part of Their Identities? To What Extent Do They Attribute Their Life Challenges to Their Disability?**

Several theoretical perspectives underlie these questions relating to the identity/identities configuration in analyzing and explicating the experience of disability within my research framework. Using my Asianness as an example, I had not considered



my being Asian as one of my identities until I came to the United States. I have learned about my Asianness through how Asians are represented in publications, media products, and formal and informal conversations. I also have learned what my Asianness entails in this society as I make sense and interpret how others interact with me or treat me in ways that remind me that I am different from them and that I am Asian. From hard workers with few leadership skills to Geisha girls, many cultural images, symbols, and assumptions let me see what my Asianness signifies. I then have accepted or rejected those stereotypes and assumptions about Asians and Asianness as I reflect my own lived experiences and situated knowledge that tell me what being Asian means to me. I probably do not have to claim my Asianness as an identity if I have never been in conflict with those stereotypical cultural representations. At heart, the process of my identify formation as Asian was neither mere identification with particular traits that compose Asian, nor peaceful assimilation to the mainstream cultural representations of what Asians are like. It was a product of my continuing reflections of who I am *not* and why I am *not* the one whom people assume. My Asianness as an identity is conflict-ridden and how I have experienced it matters for how I identify myself with it.

From this theoretical view, stories about how and why a young female has come to identify herself with a disability or not can reveal the nature of social practices that significantly influences one's identity formation process. This approach can also focus on her subjective experiences of a person, while critically examining the cultural imagery of disability in the everyday life context in which she resides. I thought that taking this approach was particularly important for young females with disabilities in the juvenile

justice system who have long been marked with a number of negative biases and stereotypes.

### **A Talk about Talking about Disability**

Since I began interviewing participants, I have come to recognize that most participants do not seem to want to talk about their experiences relating to or associated with disability and special education. Unlike when they talked about their own general school and educational experiences, their future goals, or their relationships with others, their words seemed to come out with difficulty. They would talk about disability or special education in general or about their observations or thoughts about their peers who receive special education services. However, at least until they got to know me, disability and special education remained relatively challenging topics for discussion with my participants. They did not seem to want me to associate them with disability or special education.

In fact, asking my participants about disability was not easy for me either. I have recognized that the word *disability* is a confusing concept to approach in the research context. Terminologies such as disability, special education program, or special education needs are likely to have been used interchangeably in daily conversations. However, none of these terminologies has absolute meanings and roles. It depends on how each social institution conceptualizes disability and arranges material environments for those who are identified with the disability defined. It also depends on how those who label others conceptualize disability, explain to their students or clients why they are labeled, and determine the needs and solutions of their students or clients.

Moreover, a term such as *special education* can imply or directly point to the existence of disability in school-age individuals, yet it is strictly contextually-bound. Another term, *disability*, can denote its universal condition. There is another term relating to disability: *Mental illness*. For some participants, it was not disability but mental illness with which they associated their conditions. Some participants with so-called mental illness had IEPs while others did not. To me, as one who does not subscribe to the hegemonic conception of disability, calling my participants disabled has never made me comfortable.

In fact, the confusing interchangeability of disability-related terminologies is not limited to the context where those who are so labeled are situated. Think about how too often disability-related language is used in everyday conversation: People sometimes say, “Oh, she is like bipolar (or schizophrenic, ADHD, manic, and so on),” just to describe or explain particular personal or behavioral traits of a person. Recognizing the taken-for-granted use and the cultural acceptance of the use, it is startling to see how able-oriented our society is. Some terminologies, such as schizophrenia, now are even used as a scholarly jargon, referring to incoherency, fragmentation, transitional states of mind, or social phenomena, to name a few. The semiotic understanding of disability suggests that the everyday use of disability-related language implies or directly refers to something abnormal, incomprehensive, odd, deviant, uncontrollable, or chaotic. Individuals with disabilities live in social, cultural, and political conditions where they have to negotiate and renegotiate their ideas of who they are as they reflect what the cultural representations of disability mean to them. My participants are not exceptions. They live

in the same social, cultural, and political conditions. As a disabled female and critical disabled researcher, I was painfully aware of the cultural messages I might have delivered by asking my participants about disability or special education services.

***“We Don’t Talk about That”***

With my keen awareness of the cultural imagery of disability, it was very awkward to ask my participants why they appeared to be uncomfortable with topics relating to disability and special education. However, if the topic itself or the structure of my questions made them talk less, there must be important implications about which I would need to think deeply.

During an interview with Lavon at her group home, I told her honestly that I had been feeling that my participants, including her, seemed to have difficulty in talking about topics relating to disability or special education. I then asked her if she could tell me possible reasons this might be. I must have looked serious or worried when I asked her this. Lavon started laughing as she looked at my face.

I don’t know. It just... sometimes... I can’t let stuff out that I want to let it out...but I really wanna let out... but I don’t... and I don’t know why I’ve be holding it back. Then sooner or later you wanna just let everything out.

The expression on Lavon’s face looked as if she was searching for words that would come out from her mouth with the meaning that she wanted to convey. I asked Lavon again if I should keep asking questions even when I saw my participants having difficulty in talking about these topics. She nodded once and said to me firmly, “Yes.” After this conversation, she looked more relaxed. For Lavon, disability is something that she kept

inside. Therefore, she needed time to reflect. I gradually came to learn from my participants that even when they have little to say, it does not necessarily mean that they do not have *anything* to say. Their words sometimes come out slowly, as if they have been waiting to be found. Creating time for them to reflect on their experience seemed crucial. I had to wonder how often educators and professionals working with young people have missed opportunities to understand their students or clients because they as listeners are almost always running out of time.

In response to the same question, Nicole suggested that some people may think that issues relating to disability are too private to talk about and so they might be afraid for someone to “get in their business.” In fact, Nicole was the only participant who told me that she would pick disability first to describe who she is before she would name female or African American. She told me little by little that she has been receiving special education services since she was a kindergartener under the category of emotional disability. She did not remember much about her early experiences of being served in special education programs. However, she remembered that when she had been pulled out of regular classrooms and taken to a resource room, she used to go to her friends and cry. Nicole is also diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She said that she feels that everyone understands her differently and sometimes some people misunderstand her and what she says. It makes her feel hurt, but she seldom talks about how she has felt about her disability status or special education experiences. Nicole’s program manager once told me that Nicole is not a shy person at all, but she tends to open up to a very few people.

For Nicole, disability is a private matter. How she experiences disability has been kept inside.

On the other hand, Renee and Monica were very open to talking about any topic from beginning, including topics relating to disability and special education. Their openness was distinctively different from other girls. In fact, Renee was always remarkably open to any questions posed. She once told me that one of her future dreams is to become an early childhood educator and a motivational speaker. She told me that she has gone through tough times as a child, so she knows what it takes for young children to grow up with few resources to get going and believing in what they can accomplish. This made me ask her how she would think about sharing her experiences of being served in special education programs with others who want to understand more about young females who are identified as having a disability. Renee responded:

It's good to have your voice heard by somebody else that especially like me who did not know what I got like mental problem. It's good to let other people know that yeah I got this problem but I also am an average person. It's good to like share with somebody instead of kept a lot held in.

I was a little surprised by her response. Even for Renee, who is very frank, disability is something that she has kept inside. It prompted me to ask her what topics she usually talks about in everyday conversations with her family and friends.

I talk to them a lot, talk to them about my issues, my problems. If I'm mad, I don't want to be bothered, I talk to them about why I'm mad, I would talk to them about you know teenager stuff, stuff they wanna know about. Yeah, I talk to them about pretty much about everything. Both my friends, we talk about people, school, what's going on the next weekend, or we're doing this weekend. I mean we talk pretty much I'm gonna talk to you about anything, I'm not gonna

hide nothing from nobody. So, if I wanna know something I go and ask them something, so I talk to pretty much anybody about anything.

I then asked her often she talks with her family members or friends about topics relating to special education services.

None.

Her response clearly demonstrated that she talks about disability and special education with me because she assumes her role as a storyteller. She has a clear awareness and understanding of the contribution she makes by sharing her own experiences with me. Yet, talking about special education does not belong to any context of her everyday conversations with her family members or friends. She told me why she thinks she does not talk about it with them:

I mean, cause we... I mean when we talk about, it ain't nowhere near special education services cause we talk about like me and my mama, we talk about sex, drugs all that. Me and my friends, we talk about, "Oh did you see what she had on?" You see, "Oh, the boy looking good today." We talk about stuff like that. We don't talk about "I heard you are slow." We don't talk about none of that. Cause that's not I mean that not what friends do. They don't talk down on each other. They talk about other thing.

The only occasion she would talk about special education would be in special education classrooms that she attends.

Hum, my friend, if she's like, "Why you always leaving when we have test?" I was like, you know I'm saying like, "I got this IEP thing, and it says I need to be pulled out with the test." And so that's the only time we talk about but other than that they don't look at this like you slow or something they don't look at this like that. They look at as you know I'm saying. They think I'm just failing all my

classes and need somebody to help me to catch up with my work. That's how they look at that. They don't look at this as me being you know slower than everybody else.

Renee illustrated the cultural perception of disability; talking about disability or special education with friends who are so labeled means to put them down. Culturally, disability denotes being slow or different, no matter how official disability labels or categories announce the differences in conditions. Disability has such durable images and assumptions. Even though Renee apparently has no problem talking about her own experiences of being served in a special education program, she is still worried about what other people would think of her status of being in need of special education services. How she carefully differentiates failing classes from being slow is striking. Talking about one's own special education status alone may mean to run a risk of being perceived or judged as such. As a matter of fact, this cultural view of disability is not unique to Renee. Other girls affirmed Renee's descriptions of special education signified in everyday school practices.

My participants indicate that they are most likely to hold things relating to their disability inside. Perhaps this is one of the hardest aspects of being labeled as one with a disability. Unlike race, gender, or class of which everyday experiences can be shared in casual conversations with one's family members, relatives, community members, or close friends, the experience of disability is something that can make it difficult to find others who talk about it without feeling restrained, anxious, or judged. If disability does not belong in everyday talk, where does it belong? How has the talk of disability been carried out in history? Has it only belonged to medical or rehabilitative discourses? The way in



which my participants talk or do not talk about their experience of disability, or the act of talking or not talking about disability itself illuminates the personal and historical significance of disability experience. The significance of talking about disability turned out to be greater than I expected.

### **Research Question Evolved and Modified**

The continuing interviews and interactions with my participants started to reveal several factors constituting the differences between the girls who were willing or unwilling to talk about their disability experience in spite of the similarities in their perceptions and experiences of being so labeled. Unexpectedly, these differences highlighted the relations between their understanding and continuing negotiations of the meaning of disability labels given and the perceived helpfulness and effectiveness of educational services planned and provided, which further affected their perceived opportunity structure. These findings shaped my analysis, resulting in some changes in the original research question posed in this section. I decided to combine the research question posed in this section with another of my research questions—*As the consumers of special education services, how and when do these young females evaluate the service provided to them as beneficial or detrimental in achieving their self-identified goals?*

Specifically, while the disability-as-identity configuration remained a focal point to explore and understand the nature of social practices through my participants' identity formation process, the cultural imagery of disability, and the girls' subjective experiences of disability, my discussion in this section extended its scope to the understanding of how

their perceived helpfulness and effectiveness of the special education services planned and provided to them have influenced their perceived opportunity structure.

***Experiencing Disability—Lavon***

How special education is implemented varies by school. The age at which each participant was identified as having a disability and/or started receiving special education also varies. Some participants clearly remembered where, how, and by whom they were told about their disability or services to be given. Other participants only vaguely remembered those details. However, most of them did not seem to have forgotten how they felt when they were told to go to separate classes or when they were treated differently.

Lavon, for example, does not remember how her school counselor explained to her how and why the school put her in special education classes. However, she remembers how she felt about being pulled out and taken to classes designated for students with disabilities:

Being in a class where the people in a class and stuff, I don't like, I don't like that...I like being in a big class with other kids.

K: Can you describe what was the feeling like?

I was frustrated and mad... cause I was frustrated...cause I was... I didn't know how was gonna act up in there with just little BE kids. I was MAD cause I was gonna be in there.

The review of Lavon's records indicated that she originally started receiving special education services under the category of educatable mental retardation (EMD)

when she was 11 years old. It is documented that she has had numerous suspensions due to her noncompliant and aggressive behavior toward her peers and adults. Allegedly, she was under the influences of drug when she was involved in several serious fights with other girls. It is also documented that her refusal to complete her class work and assignments, in addition to her suspensions, caused her to fail a number of classes. When Lavon was in the eighth grade, Lavon's mother requested that the school re-evaluate Lavon. While her mother admitted that Lavon would need some type of special education services, she did not think the EMD label represented Lavon's educational needs. The results of the re-evaluation changed her label from EMD to specific learning disability (SLD). The change in the label, however, did not seem to have transformed Lavon's school experiences or educational outcomes. She continues to struggle academically and behaviorally.

During our interviews Lavon mentioned that she had had several disability labels such as ADHD and bipolar disorder, but she never mentioned any label relating to EMD or SLD. At the end of an interview, I asked Lavon if she had any questions that she wanted to ask of me or about me. She asked me if I was an "IEP person" at any time during my elementary, middle, or high school education. I explained to her that my country did not have the same educational system as America does, so I did not have an IEP, but if I was in the United States at her age I would have had one. I learned from her that the phrase *IEP person* is the marker with which she has been signified. She certainly feels she has ADHD and bipolar disorder and that she has had to go to lower classes.

A review of Lavon's files and the continuing interviews with Lavon reminded me of Allison's description of students with special education needs. During an interview, Allison talked about how female students can be a target for some types of harassment. As our conversation progressed, I asked her if she had seen any types of harassment toward students with special education needs.

YEAH. ALL THE TIME. They be like, "You are in that slow class, ain't you?" And just pick on them. I think, or maybe, I'm not trying to pick on like...hum... like retarded kids at lunch. And people just laugh at them and stuff and laugh at them and that's so wrong. Because they can't do anything about it. They don't have anything to say. (...) And people know and what they are doing in school and maybe in a slow class and they get picked on because they are in the class. And they just don't have any say so in what they do. And somebody say some to them and I guess they get scared to say some back and they just don't talk. Like they get afraid of somebody because they pick on them and they say some and they might get like more picked on. So they just be quiet. And let people step on them.

Allison also recalled how she used to observe her peers receiving special education services:

See....it's still cause see, when like I was going to school, and hum, like a regular school, hum, and I've seen somebody having somebody in the class with somebody sitting beside them and helping them or whatever, I was trying.... I mean a kind of troubled kid or whatever, and I used to think like okay she is in a slow class or something, and it's...see that could like hurt people's feeling because like somebody might say something to them.

Allison's descriptions of how she used to hear and observe her peers receiving special education services seems to demonstrate that no matter how individual student information is kept confidential, it is clear that special education classrooms or special education teachers themselves culturally signify which students are different from the rest

of students. How hard is it for a student to be perceived as a student in a slow class? How hard has it been for Lavon to be perceived as an IEP person? Renee and Allison indicate that it has not been easy.

I had an opportunity to attend a team meeting held at Lavon's group home. During the meeting, Lavon was pressed by her mother, a group home manager, a group home director, a case manager, and a social worker as to why she keeps getting in trouble in school and skipping classes. She had few words for the team members. Lavon had started a fight a few weeks prior to the meeting and the team members were waiting to hear from the school about disciplinary action for Lavon. When I saw Lavon prior to the meeting, she told me that she had tried to help her friend who lives in the same group home because another girl was going to fight her. That was why she ended up being involved in the fight. In fact, being involved in a fight in an attempt to help friends was the most common reason for fighting which I heard from my participants. Nicole, Renee, Monica, and Allison all shared the same reasons for their fighting.

In the meeting, I was sitting beside Lavon and was listening to Lavon's silence. I was recalling what Lavon told me during our interviews. She was so frustrated with school work that she did not want to go to class. I asked her where she usually goes when she skips classes. "Bathroom," she replied. She looked a little embarrassed. I asked Lavon why she sometimes decides not to go to classes. She said that she does so because classes are too difficult or boring, or because of peer pressure. I then asked her how she thinks her school or special education program could help her learn better and be successful.

Can't. Can't cause... they just want to make their money. Yeah, they say they care about you but they don't.

I asked her why she feels this way.

If they did it was better. They throw us books but we gotta do.

While the team members were asking Lavon if she would want to go to an alternative school in order to improve her behavior, Lavon still had no answer. She looked as if she had something in mind but she appeared to hold on to it. I also was recalling how Allison explained how students who are behind are likely to feel in classrooms. I asked Allison if she had any positive changes since she was receiving special education services. What Allison described to me sounded as if she was speaking for Lavon.

Hum, knowing like....most kids, when they are making like they make one bad grade, and then they just give up because it's not that the kids don't wanna do the work. It's because they don't know how, and when they don't know how they just feel like they should do something else other than do their work. Because they cannot get it right and I guess they don't...I guess they feel embarrassed to ask for help.

I asked Lavon if acting up as the result of their frustration with school work can make students feel worse afterward:

No, that makes them feel BETTER, I guess. ...I don't know. Because .... I don't know how to put it. Hum.... Like, mmm.... I don't know..., they just.... I don't know, like I said, when you don't know something I guess you don't wanna just sit there, you might sleep in class, or you might just act out, and just don't do their work, because they don't know how, it's not that.... they be like, I don't wanna do this, just cuss out the teacher cause they didn't wanna do the work and that's....that's...or cause they are talking, cause they don't know how to do it, if they knew how to do it, they be focused on their paper. (...) They think it is

because they been gotten so many F's and throughout the whole year, and they just don't know how to do it, and they've let it go that long, but it is all you really need it, it's like some tutoring that gets you caught up with what you are doing. So, kids, I think, that are making Fs should be held back...I think it should be that they should make them have a tutoring class. I think they should make that.

As Allison stated, I have heard from Lavon that she really needs tutoring or similar types of educational support to catch up with classes. I wanted to observe Lavon at her school, but I was not able to because, according to the group home manager, so many problems were going on in the school that the principal did not want to have outsiders come to the school to observe students. Throughout my interviews and the review of Lavon's files, I kept feeling that Lavon's needs had been underserved and that her IEP had not addressed her education properly. Therefore, even though I had no role to assume as a member of the team, I decided to say something for Lavon. I told the team members that I did not feel that Lavon's needs had been met and that she should have been eligible for more services. The group home manager and a house counselor told me they were told by the school that the school serves the students what they can offer, meaning that the school would not offer any additional services other than existing resource classes and after school sessions. It was then that Lavon suddenly spoke in a loud voice, "I don't wanna go to that slow class." She was reprimanded for her use of the adjective as well as for not attending her assigned classes. It was very obvious that she did not want to attend those classes.

Lavon's behavior plan indicates that she needs to improve in two areas; verbal aggression and skipping. The reason for her problem behavior has been identified as a desire to gain power. This caused me to recall my participants frequently describing the

competitive nature of school climate and the cultural imagery of special education. I also recalled Allison's portrayal of the perceived or possibly actual powerlessness of students in special education programs. What if Lavon is *tough* enough to talk back so as not to let others step on her? Hasn't she been trying to survive? Fighting with other girls and noncompliance continues to get Lavon into trouble with the juvenile law, and Lavon would not talk about her experience of disability in school. Even if she did, would the well-received disability/disability system in the educational system take seriously how she has been experiencing disability? Few people might think how being labeled as one in need of special education could affect Lavon's school behavior, and my speculation may be totally wrong. However, I cannot help but think how frustrating it must be to be labeled different when the difference tells you that you are below average.

I asked Lavon if her disability labels or her experiences being in special education classrooms have affected her idea of who she is. She said, "No." In fact, for Lavon, her idea of who she is has never harmonized with the label that identifies her as different from her peers. This does not mean she thinks that she does not need extra supports for her educational attainment. She told me she believes that getting an education and earning a high school diploma is crucial for her academic and social mobility. She told me that getting pregnant and dropping out of school is not the best option for female teenagers. She wants to go to a college to expand her possibilities. Otherwise, she could have been already dropped out: More than half of her friends and peers she knows have already dropped out. Therefore, she acknowledges that special education should have been good only to the extent to which it has kept her in school and given her eligibility



for services. She also explained that having a disability label may be good for some people under particular circumstances because it may help them “get money for it.” However, Lavon does not feel she receives services that can pay the costs of being labeled. She wishes she never had to carry a disability label. Lavon continues to struggle making sense of why others keep seeing her differently. Consequently, she began feeling that she may have to accept how others see her differently:

Like... I already..., I am thinking what they are not thinking and I am not thinking what they are thinking. I am just going my way.... they are saying, so....

She looked very sad when she said this. I asked her how she had been coping with what others were telling her. She said, “Just go along.” In the meeting I heard Lavon being told several times that she had not yet been expelled from school because of her disability label. It is the disability label that makes Lavon feel isolated, and it is the disability label that keeps her in the school. She is caught up with what the disability label does to and for her. I keep wondering if the fact that she was labeled has been a significant factor in her problems in school.

### ***Experiencing Disability—Adoncia***

Adoncia said that she does not recall much about who explained to her that she was going to receive special education services, because she started receiving them early in elementary school.

I really didn't have reaction, because I was like really little. I just have been growing up in schools knowing that I was BED and I had like different classes to go to.

Adoncia echoes Lavon in that she thinks special education services have been helpful to some extent. She told me that English was not her first language and she did not speak in English until she entered elementary school. Therefore, the early elementary school years for her were those of cultural assimilations, while trying to cope with unsafe conditions at home and in the community. Therefore, special education enabled her to find some teachers who she could “let them my work done.”

Like Lavon, Adoncia does not think that her disability labels have affected her idea of who she is. Instead, she thinks that what her disability labels have affected is others’ perceptions and attitudes toward those who are so labeled. Whether with or without particular disability labels, Adoncia thinks that Adoncia is Adoncia, who is easy to be around. Therefore, Adoncia has never found a disability label to be helpful or a good thing:

Cause some of the kids like, oh you’re different than the rest of us, and stuff like that.

It was interesting to hear Adoncia pointing out that different schools arrange different learning milieus for their students. Adoncia stated that for the first several years in elementary school she also received services for some type of speech delay. Her process of cultural assimilation in those years alone might already have accentuated the differences that she had to deal with, which therefore might have eclipsed how she had to deal with the fact that she had different classes to attend. However, as she gradually was acculturated, her BED status as a difference became more discernible than before. She

recalled that her high school years as a student with BED were different from her elementary or middle school years:

Yeah, it's really different because elementary, middle school was like a lot of kids there already in my like...in my shoes, they BED and stuff, they have trouble with their families and stuff. But in high school was like there was not many kids like that. And it's like just like I had a test at school one time, and my social studies class or world history, and hmm, I was just I couldn't...I had to have help so I was like he sent me to another class and other kids were like, "Where did you go to get help?" It was like... I was kinda embarrassed.

Like Lavon, Adoncia indicates that being different from her peers or being treated differently is a great sore during youth and adolescence. Adoncia recalled that being in a BED classroom was comfortable to a certain extent. She said that she usually got along better with students in the classroom than students in regular classrooms, not because of the labeling itself but because students in the classroom could relate to each other. During one interview, Adoncia mentioned:

I feel that it's good that somebody is actually asking us questions like this cause they usually like don't actually have any interest in special education classes with the kids that are in there so I feel that it is the world's coming that they actually have something in store for everybody.

Students in BED classroom are likely to share similar life challenges outside school.

They also share similar experiences of being subject to what Young (2000) might call *cultural imperialism* where they remain invisible and marginalized within the school due to their disability labels, but at the same time are visible because of their marked disability labels.

Adoncia was very friendly and open to any topic except those relating to disability. When it came to special education, she had little to say. However, as our interviews and interactions continued, her comfort level for discussing disability changed. I came to understand that she was worried about how I would judge her based on the fact that she had multiple disability labels. As she realized that her talk about disability does not change my attitude toward her, she began expressing her own opinions or what is true to her rather than being concerned about what responses sound appropriate. During an interview, she told me that her plan upon discharge from the facility was developed and that she was content with the plan. In an earlier interview, she had told me that she was probably going back to a regular high school, while she expressed her worry about how being retained would affect her relationships with her peers for the rest of her school years. The new plan seemed to give her a new direction to pursue her goal to become a nurse.

Like me, I'm two grades behind. Like, my class next year, well this year is almost over so next year we are supposed to be 11th grade. I'm still in the 9th. So, it's like, I want better for myself, like I don't feel like, going through grade after grade, and getting picked on by my other classmates. (...) I've gone through group homes, locked down facilities, and stuff like that. (...) That's why I'm going to get my GED, because I can still get the same success.

She then recounted how hard for her to start believing in what she can do:

Hum....., like....where I came from, like I really haven't been, like people all the time tell me, Adoncia, you are very smart girl. You can do anything that you put your mind to. And I've never like... really listened to them cause I feel that I'm not... where I came from, it's like I'm not great enough to do what they expect out of me. I just really don't give much what I do in school. I skip class, I don't go to school....if I go to school, I skip classes. If I don't I'd be going smoking

and stuff, skipping school. And it's like that's why I'm failing right now it's because of that. And so I really haven't noticed any strength in me, YET....but when I was in school....But I'm starting to notice that. I'm starting to notice that I am a very smart girl. And I can do anything I do put my mind to.

She reflected how disability labels affected her idea of who she is and her school performance:

Because once I get..., like once somebody diagnosed me with something, I started believing in okay they diagnosed me then that's what I have. Like nobody can change where.... I think. Like, I got a diagnosis with ODD. Okay, I don't have anything more. It's off my list. But I do have PTSD and [several other diagnoses]. And it's like I don't see that in myself. And it's like before, people like oh you have ODD. Okay, I have ODD, so I started...I looked it up and I started seeing the symptoms of it. So, that makes me think even more that that's what I have. And so that's why I used, like not to care. That's how that affected me doing my school work.

Adoncia has realized that once a person is officially diagnosed, the person does not have the power to cancel it. If the person is a child, chances are that the person takes it as if it was a life sentence. She learned the effect of being labeled that was manifested in her perception of the opportunity structure ahead of her.

Adoncia also expressed her anxiety of stepping into a new path for the future. She feels that the fact that she has multiple disabilities constantly makes her fear others' reactions to the labels she carries with her. When asked if she foresees any barriers or obstacles in achieving her future goals, she responded:

I'm going to a community college to get my GED. So, I'm afraid that since they know that I have, like, disorders, not like crazy disorders, PTSD and stuff like that, and they're gonna look at me like why she here and stuff like that. So, that's one of my fears of going to get my GED.

Obviously, Adoncia fears not who she is but what her labels culturally signify and make others think—that she is different. Her fear reflects the normative cultural practices that inflate the negative images and assumptions of disability and individuals with disabilities.

Critically, Adoncia's remarks illuminate the fact that gaining self-knowledge about one's own disability, as it has been emphasized in the mainstream self-determination or self-advocacy literature in the field of special education, can backfire if such self-knowledge prevents one from evaluating the historical and ongoing social systems that not only conceptualize particular human conditions such as disability, disorders, or deviance, but also oppress those who are so labeled. As Adoncia explains, the more she learned about her disabilities, the less she perceived her opportunities. She now realizes that she does not have to submit herself to the labels. Nonetheless, she fears the strong effects of the cultural imagery of disability on others' reactions toward her.

### ***Experiencing Disability—Monica***

Unlike Lavon and Adoncia, Monica appeared to have no problem talking about her experience of disability or special education classrooms. It may be fair to say that Monica willingly took part in this study because she found an opportunity to talk about her disability experience. I shared my perception that while other participants appeared to be a bit uncomfortable talking about topics relating to their experiences with special education services and disability, she seemed at ease talking about these topics. Monica stated straightforwardly:

I guess cause being identified really don't bother me. So, I'll talk about it, it really don't bother me. Cause I know I'm not..... I'm not BED. I know I'm not so don't bother me talking about it.

Monica looked at me as if to see how I would react to her saying that she is not BED. I encouraged her to say what she honestly thinks by being silent but nodding:

Cause some people think it's embarrassing. I mean, you don't bother me. Cause I know I'm not BED. So, they were just embarrassed to talk about it but I'm not.

Monica's response sounded confirming that talking about one's experience of being served in special education is something that makes one feel embarrassed. In fact, Monica is the only participant who explicitly stated that being a young female is not easy because of the disability label imputed to her:

I mean, it's...it's kinda hard...like... Let me see how I explain it. I think it is kinda hard because like Mr. Robinson [school principal] said in the meeting, most, um, minorities are the ones that are known to cause the trouble, I know this do that and a third and sometimes I feel like that this BED they just put a placement on me. So sometimes that can get in the way but then you know, then I know other black females that say this is easy but for me it's not easy cause you know like I have, okay like my sister she is in a wildness camp. (...) She get sent there, so that's kinda frustrating whatever but I mean it's easy but it's not. (...) I mean it's easy for some but I feel like it's hard for me. Because like the BED thing. They put a placement on you, like I said,. Just get a placement on you and sometimes, it's hard to get it off.

Monica acknowledges how racial stereotyping has historically encumbered minority group members from their pursuits in academic and vocational attainment. She has her friends who share the same tensions and barriers, but her label makes her school experiences different from most of her friends and peers who do not have a disability or special education label. Her label makes her ongoing struggles in the school more salient.

The fact that she disbelieves her label did not make her different from other participants in terms of how she reacted to the fact that she was going to receive special

education. She recalled the first day when she was told that she was going to receive special education services under the category of BED. It was when she was in middle school.

Oh, yeah, well when they told me that I was going to be put in BED and I had a behavior disability, Like I said I was mad. And I really went off. Like we were sitting in a small room like this and had a conference. Me and my mom and my teachers and a BED lady. I got mad and I was like I am not retarded why I need to be BED cause I thought they were trying to say that I am slow or something. But I didn't like it at all but then I realized well I am just making it worse. And there wouldn't nothing I could do. I can't take it off. My mom, it's just my mother's choice and the school's choice. I couldn't...I couldn't do nothing.... So.

Monica echoes Renee and Allison regarding the perception toward students who are in need of special education services. I asked her what comes to her mind when she hear a word disability.

Like disability, okay well when I first heard BED, me having disability I felt like, slow, you know, like slow kids or mentally challenged kids, that what I would think as disability, but as I got older I realized that disability comes in different you know like you don't always have to be mentally or dysformed figure to be disability, like, I like well, I do have disability cause I do have anger problems, and that's considered disability. So like when I first heard it, I was like I'm not retarded, but now that I know it's just not always like a physical thing or a mental thing, you know it's...many disabilities.

Here, Monica also reiterates the cultural imagery of disability as being slow. Having been identified as a young female with BED obligated her to see how she is perceived by her teachers and necessitated a change in her definition of disability. Whether she rejects or accepts the label given, her remarks indicate that she allowed herself to combine the



traditional definition of disability known to her with other definitions. As her definition of disability expanded, I asked her what being a young female with the BED label means:

It basically means to me that I'm a girl who don't really know how to act with my disability. That I don't know how to act civilized, acting in civilized manner around people. That's what it means to me. And especially just putting a stereotype on me, and that's not true but I can say whatever I want but I feel like if this is down on paper, if that's in my record, then, that's what it is. So, it just basically makes me feel like I'm put out there as a female who doesn't know how to control herself in a civilized manner. That has an anger problem, and will just flip out, just don't care. And that's not true.

The ongoing talk with Monica suggested that her perceived difficulty of being a young female with a disability is associated to a great extent with her perceptions and experiences of the BED label that affect others' perceptions and attitudes toward her. For example, she has experienced a continuously conflicting negotiation and renegotiation of who she is and what her label is likely to inform who she is to others. During an interview, I asked her if she had ever sensed that what she writes or says is not taken seriously by others. Monica remarked:

Oh, yeah. Like...okay, this is the way I feel. Like I am in BED and you know that is for kids, they say, behavioral emotional disabilities, which means they in a classroom setting I cannot cooperate. It's like they put their label on me and I don't feel like that I am like that. But you know since I have the label you know teachers look at my profile and go she is BED. So sometimes when I do you know try to act serious and do this, people won't take me seriously cause they think I am joking and I'm not joking, I'm serious and I just get mad and then like a big problem comes out so but you know some people take me seriously but most people really don't. You know like my friends like they know when I'm serious and when I'm not. But as far as teachers, they just be like whatever Monica or whatever, you are lying or whatever you know. And I am really not. Sometimes I do feel they don't take me seriously and then I feel like, well, I have to show out to get them understand I'm serious, and then I get into trouble and once again she is BED, I expected that from her. But this really not me.

I asked her how often she thought she had tried to get people take her seriously.

Like...I mean, like sometimes it's hard to get people to take you seriously but I've been BED since I was in 6th grade and now I am in 10th, so I think I came along, and I think people still do, I think people are starting to take me seriously so I feel like to myself I am trying my best, you know, trying to like turn my whole attitude around and maybe I can just get people clean this slate off and get another slate, but sometimes people don't wanna clean your slate off, and it's like well they just build and build and build on top of like your past and like I feel like this is the past, so I feel like well, I still, I still need to try to harder and harder, so it's like so I sometimes I feel like I strain myself to get people to understand me, so sometimes I just feel like, well, forget it, but then when I think about it I know that I don't want people to think of me like this. You know once I get out of the school, I don't want people to think of me like well that's the girl who started trouble all the time, cause that's not me.

Monica's experiences reveal that the BED label is stigmatizing enough to subjugate those who are identified as having it. She echoed Nicole and Lavon who expressed that they often felt misunderstood. She described herself as a kind, sweet-hearted, compromising, and happy person. These traits correspond to how she has appeared to me. She has been very patient and understanding, even when some of my questions may have made her uncomfortable to a certain extent. What the label represents to her has never fit with who she thinks she is. Yet, the constant gaze that she has received while she is in school has convinced her of the effects of the label which she cannot shake.

Yeah, it has, but you know, like I know, you know, I'm not like this but it does affect who I am because people be like well, all the teachers, teachers seem to throw it up in your face, like, "Well, you're BED. Don't forget." And then like brings the anger out in me and I be like, "What?" You know, get an attitude, so in a way it does but most of the time it doesn't cause it is just like... I mean I've been on it for so long so I kinda look over it but I never forget about it.

K: I see. Then, is your disability label, do you think, has affected your idea of who you are outside the school?

No.... Because like basically like outside the school nobody knows. You know they just know me. They just know, okay she is Monica, they know my character, they know my personality. So, it really don't affect me outside the school.

Juxtaposing Monica's sense making and interpretations about her disability experience with those of other girls shows some remarkable contrast. For example, other girls responded that the fact that they were identified as having disabilities or being labeled did not affect their ideas of who they are. However, they did not seem to want to talk about these topics until they became comfortable. On the other hand, Monica felt that the disability label affected her self-identity while she was in school, yet she was open to talk about her own experience of disability and what she thought about her label.

Monica and Renee are the only girls who do not have a psychiatric diagnostic label. The fact that Monica's disability is basically conceptualized to be associated with school learning may be a factor. As Monica described, she clearly feels and perceives the pressure and ramifications of the label imputed as she steps into the school. She neither wants to carry the label outside the school nor wants others to remember her as one with the label. Her conflicts that are associated with her label are contextual, whereas the effects of psychiatric labels may have had more long-term and enduring effects on other girls such as Adoncia, Nicole, and Lavon, because the material environments arranged for them based on their given label have covered both their private and public spheres. These enduring effects, therefore, may have compelled them to hold things relating to

their disabilities inside. Monica expressed her conflicting negotiations between her legitimate frustrations resulting from the ramification of the label given and her counter-effects of trying to make herself understood that what the label signifies does not represent her. The best way she has had to learn is to go with the flow as the label is on her file. She feels powerless to remove her label. If this is so, such negotiation processes may have been longer for Adoncia, Nicole, and Lavon, whose frustrations associated with the ramifications of being labeled may have been understood as the symptoms of their disabilities and not as the reactions to the erroneous perceptions and negative attitudes toward their needs of mental health services. Disability labels can disguise oppressive social practices toward those who are so labeled.

In addition, Adoncia and Nicole received their labels when they were very young, while Monica started receiving services when she was in middle school. Monica's age may have let her see the social and political roles assigned to the disability label given. That is, when asked whether they found any positive or negative changes or outcomes as the result of receiving special education services, Lavon, Adoncia, and Nicole did not find any tangible changes or outcomes other than acknowledging that the services had been helpful to some extent. On the other hand, Monica clearly observed the disability label as a possible means for her educational attainment. While she has never wished to have the label, she has had some period of time when she felt that the special education services benefited her. It is noteworthy that Monica differentiates the label and the services as if these two are exclusively different entities. She sees special education as a commodity for her academic and social mobility while she sees the label as an

encumbrance. For example, while she expressed her feeling of frustrations about the label imputed to her, when asked about the services themselves, her responses dramatically changed in content. When asked how she perceived positive or negative changes or outcomes of receiving special education services, Monica responded:

Like negative ....nothing really negative happened to me. I think, I think only thing negative happened to me about the services was when teachers throw it up in my face like in middle school, they be like, "Don't forget you are on BED. I can get you put out of my class" or stuff like that. That's the only thing negative that has happened, which then caused me to act up. Get mad and I really get sent out. So, really....

Her distinction between the label and the services is also illuminated in the following remarks:

K: How do you understand the disability label you are given?

I don't understand at all actually cause I don't think I'm BED. I mean everybody has their like everybody goes off, everybody gets mad so I feel like why do I have to be placed as BED cause I get mad? Like it's just like basically saying you can't get mad you going be classified as you have a disability. I mean sometimes I do know that my temper is quick but it's a lot of people in the world with tempers quick. So I don't understand that like sometimes I wanna get off of it but then you know like I have an IEP plan that I mean I agree with it but the label I do not agree with. Cause I don't think I am BED.

Monica told me how she felt about being in a different class:

At first I felt stupid cause there were not many people in a class but I actually worked better in settings like that cause there's not that many people, it's probably like 4 kids in a class at a time and 2 teachers so I could get one on one time it was easier, so I actually I do learn better in there so really it didn't bother me cause I was learning and I was passing so it didn't bother me at all. That's why I wish they had here, you know, like I could go there for math. And then I

could get one on one help with the teacher but they don't have a BED class but they have BED students.

At first, I wasn't gonna do it. At first I was going off, cutting up, cause I thought that if I did it then they'd take me off but then I realized well, the more I show out, the longer I'm gonna be on it, so I mean eventually I got used to it, but I still don't agree with it, but I know that I have to work my way off so I just feel like well I'll deal with it and prove to everybody that I am not BED and I know how to act. And I mean like I said everybody got anger problems, so why do I have to be classified as BED, I mean...

K: I really got you point actually.

But some people don't get it. They just like No, you don't know how to act in class. You disrupt class. But just there's a million kids who disrupt class but I guess... I don't know. So sometimes I like being on it cause you know like I have exceptions and stuff like that, like with my IEP plan, but the label I just don't like that.

I noticed that when she talked about special education services the tone of her voice was different from when she talked about the given label.

K: Then can I understand that you... if you could take off the label from you and receiving services as you are been receiving would it be more helpful for you?

Well, I am not really receiving services now, cause it's like last year we had a BED teacher, um... I forgot her name, I can't remember her name. Last year, she was here and like she really didn't come to me and like sit down and ask me do I need help of my work, you know give me out once or twice a month out of class to help me at lunch time or anything. She would talk to me but it wouldn't...it would just be like about my IEP plan. So I am not really, I am not getting services, and I think I am doing fine without them besides the grades. Like I know I need help with that. But as far as going class, sitting down, and doing what I am supposed to do I think I'm fine without it cause I'm not getting anything. So I want it taken off but I don't think they gonna take it off.

This is where Monica can compromise. She told me that when she was a middle school student, she had a special education teacher who she felt cared about her. The teacher always approached Monica in ways that made her feel that her academic needs were understood and attended to. She recalled that she actually did better in small classes because it was much easier to focus on what she was supposed to do rather than being in big classes and getting distracted. As long as she feels that her educational needs are attended to in a consistent and caring manner she would negotiate her label. This is also why Monica now feels that she no longer needs the label; she does not feel she receives any special education services. Interestingly, Ms. Banks, one of the special education teachers, mentioned that Monica currently performs better in school when she does not receive special education services. From Monica's viewpoint, she needs services and more personal attention. However, she does not need them if they only remind her of what the label represents to her. For Monica, if her label does not guarantee her the meaningful services that she deserves, it only gets in the way of her pursuits of academic success.

### ***Experiencing Disability—Renee***

Like Nicole, Adoncia, and Monica, Renee has been served under the category of BED. Being a very close friend of Monica, Renee and Monica resemble each other in the ways in which they talked and observed their school climate. Their reactions to the BED label were also similar. Renee started receiving special education services when she was in the 9th grade. Compared to other girls such as Nicole and Adoncia, who received the BED label when they were elementary students, Renee's special education eligibility

determination was made relatively late. According to Renee, it was her principal who told her about her special education needs during a meeting. Renee recalls her reaction to what she heard. This now has become a rather familiar phrase as my participants have commonly expressed.

Slow. I felt I was one of them. How do people say it? Slow kids. That I was gonna be in there with them. And they was like, “No, it’s not like that. It’s like classroom where like people can’t control their anger or people who got so much energy and they cannot control it.” They get, you know, special treatment than others. Just to try and calm you down whatever.

Renee’s image of a special education classroom did not match with the problem that she was told she had. Prior to the meeting, she had already been told that she had anger problems. In response to a question about who told her that she had a disability, she shared an episode:

My mom. She said, [laughed slightly] I think you ADHD. And I was like, “What?” Cause I remember pushing my cousin down some steps over a slice of cheese cake. I was like, “What?” She was like, “You ADHD.” I was like, “No I am not,” so. I went to mental health. I went to mental health about 2 or 3 year. So, I was like, “What?” It’s like I didn’t have ADHD, and so I went to mental health and they like, “Yeah, you got an anger problem” and all this stuff. So that’s the last time I recall when they said I had something wrong with me.

I asked her if she understood the principal’s explanation clearly or if there was something about it that was unclear.

At first, I didn’t understand cause I was like, “Why you put me room with slow kids? I’m not slow. I can do the work.” And they was like, “No, it is not like that.” They was like, “No, calm down, its’ like that you just got this problem” and ...and “We just you know wanna monitor your problem to see we can do the



help. That's why we are gonna put you like a lower class." And then I was like, "Oh...ok."

It sounded like Renee made sense of the purpose of the special education services pointing toward managing her anger problems. Yet, sitting in resource classrooms was another story.

The first time, when I first got into the classroom it was no more than about 15 people so I was like it wasn't click, that's why I was really in these classes. So, I had a boyfriend and he came by and wanted to see me and he was like, "I can't go with you because you are slow." I was like, "What?" He was like, "I know where you are first period." Well, that's not for slow kids. And so hum the first time they made everybody think was slow. Slow, slow. But then as they look my other class that was just like the one class I had there, and then they look and some of their friends was in there. And it wasn't because they were slow. Because they have problems and need to be monitored and dealt with to see if they improve, so...

Renee mentioned the word *boyfriend*. Given that my participants generally looked energetic and self-assured, I have long forgotten to think about how having a disability or being identified as having a disability can have significant effects on the self-concept or images of young females, or more specifically their perceived desirability and attractability within schools in which social relations epitomize those of the broader patriarchal society. As Jade and Allison exemplified, the mainstream cultural expectations and images of young females put huge pressures on young female students. How do young females negotiate their special education status when the social conditions within their schools are likely to make them worry about their appearances and social images? Renee recalled how her boyfriend changed his perception toward Renee being placed in a different class, how she dealt with those assumptions attached to the class,

which then were projected onto her being in the class, and how she had to renegotiate what she thinks needs to be improved. Renee's persistent image of special education or disability as synonymous to being slow does not seem to reflect her own personal belief. Instead, the fixed image of special education as synonymous to being slow seems to reflect both the unchanging cultural practices and the power-ridden school practices that reproduce social polarization on the basis of the ability/disability system. Renee's uses of slow as a reification of the normative cultural practice prompted me to ask her what images come to her mind when she hears the word *disability*.

Hurt, cannot walk, cannot see, cannot talk, just or you can't do nothing on your own.

Based on this image she defines disability as:

Like basically when you can't do on your own. That's why call disability you need somebody or you need to depend on somebody else to do something. Cause you can't do it.

I then asked her how she understood the disability label that she was given.

Well, they say disability can be like you know in your mind, basically like you got an anger problem. That's they call disability nowadays, so I guess, I understand like it can't just be not only... it can be also mental not just physical.

When it comes to her understanding of disability, it resonated with Monica in that they both were told that disability includes anger problems. Renee apparently accepted this concept and added the new definition of disability to what had been known to her as

disability. It also seemed that she constructed meaning by acknowledging that she has an anger problem and so has this type of disability as well. Perhaps this is an example of how disability is constructed and then is gradually accepted at both the individual level and societal level, as if labeling was an inevitable result of social and institutional practices. As far as she has made sense of what was explained, she did not seem to have had a problem with the fact that she was identified as having a disability.

While Renee and Monica are very close friends and shared similar initial reactions to their special education status, they apparently situated themselves on completely opposite sides of a continuum of whether or not they accept their identified disability status and label. For example, while Monica put value on what special education services can do for students, she questions the ramification of the disability label because she perceived that it made it easy for others to judge her based on the assumptions and images attached to the BED label. In contrast, when asked if she ever wished if she did not have the disability label, Renee responded after a few seconds of silence:

..... NO.... Cause I am glad that I got my label as to what was my problem.

Moreover, Monica feels that the BED label has strongly affected her idea of who she is, whereas Renee says it has not.

MmmMmm. It won't affect you if you.... Like someone say you disabled and you know it and but if you just kinda write off what they say and then it's not gonna affect you.

However, Renee's acceptance of her label does not mean that it has not affected her while she is in school. For example, Renee identified some negative changes that occurred as the result of being placed in different classes.

Like...like I guess cause they know, you know, my first period has like eight of us. I know they, "Yeah, she slow, she dumb." No, it's not that. (...) You gotta read to find out what it's like if changes as far as my friends, cause I had people that was my friends and then see me in the class and I made them think I'm slow. So..., then they wanna change and act different.

Even when Renee understands the nature of educational services as explained to her in a way that makes sense to her that she probably needs them and would benefit from them, her peers and friends do not see her being situated in the resource class the same way she does. Renee clearly sees the changes in her friends' attitudes which influenced her school behavior. Renee described the climate of her school, which provides several critical implications as to why students who are identified as having a disability are more likely than those without the label to get in trouble in schools:

My anger problem disability? How has affected me in school? A lot. Cause I guess, cause I know I have it and people don't know that I have it, so they like test me see what I'm about. So, when I come to school it's like welcome to West Central High. Yeah you go, you walk in, you gotta have haters on you. You gonna have people that's running their mouth. So, now it's my time to try to show what I got. So I know it affects me when I come to school, cause I know people wanna talk about me and want me to upset, so.

I asked her if students in general perceive their peers receiving special education services in similar ways, no matter which label they have:

That's why I proved to them. If I am so slow why am I doing the work that you can't do? Cause I can do upper level work, I can do honors work with no

problem. I just choose not to. But I can do the work. It's just... I just choose not to.

As I talked with Renee, it took little time to recognize that she is a bright and quick-witted young woman whose talent has not yet been fully discovered by others. I asked her why she ended up deciding not to do her work in spite of the capability she has.

I don't know I guess like before I was doing that and you had people like if you call me dumb, I'm gonna, act dumb. Just to make you right. But I know that you're actually wrong. I'm just gonna do to just make you happy. So if you call me dumb stupid I'm gonna be it. But like if you just sit down and actually know me you say I think you are pretty smart than what I thought she was. Cause I'm very smart, very, very smart. Any teacher could tell you that I just choose not to do the work.

This reminds me of Adoncia, who told how her label had considerably influenced her perceived opportunity structure and school performance, particularly in the academic domain. It may have been not only her disability label, but also the conception of the label and the material environments, that have profoundly influenced their perceived opportunity structure.

In an earlier interview, Renee also talked about the school climate that made her feel some pressure to prove or disprove others. She demonstrates seemingly conflicting ways of proving who she is and what she can do, depending on how she positions herself in particular circumstances. For example, Renee described the time when she transferred to West Central High. According to Renee, West Central High was the school she had long wanted to attend. She stated that coming to West Central High, being accepted at the school, and finding some friends with whom she felt comfortable were the best

experiences she had as a student. Therefore, in both formal and informal conversations, she expressed that she had tried to stay out of trouble. Yet, oftentimes, it was the school climate that did not let her be free from the culture of survival.

You know people at West Central, they'll take you as a joke, they'll try and try you. So I had to step my game up. I was like, well if I feel like people are gonna trying to take me as a joke, why not prove to them that I am not a joke.

Like I was all quiet and didn't talk to nobody. But when I got my friends, and people seen, cause I liked to get crunk, and crunk means I like to get like wild. And I guess people say, oh she like to be loud all the time, she not gonna do this, she not gonna do that. But then again, (...) if you try me I'm gonna try you back. So I guess just like after for a while you get tired people taking you for a joke, and you wanna show somebody what you can do cause I can do so many damage in 30 seconds to another person. It's just ridiculous. So, I showed them that, okay I can get crunk. But okay I also get, I can also get mean and angry, and do some damage. So I guess that's why I do what I do, to prove a point.

Once again, Renee's statements are reminiscent of those of Allison, who explained how students who are behind academically may act up to prove what they can do as if doing so makes up for what they cannot do. Even though this sounds counterproductive on the side of students who act up, the existing competitive nature of school culture may make them feel that not proving something only lets others step on them.

Given Renee's seeming acceptance of her disability label, the considerable influences of being labeled expressed made me wonder how she actually reconciled herself to the perceived change in the environments and peer relationships in the school, and yet affirms that the label has little to do with who she thinks she is. The continuing talk with her let me learn how she has negotiated her label and experience of disability as she transformed them in ways that push her forward.

As I talked with Renee, it became noticeable that while she said she was content with her disability label, she seemed to avoid using the word *disability* to describe what she is told she has. As often as possible, she replaced the word with *anger problems* as if she tells herself and me that she is not disabled in a traditional sense. When we were talking about her perception toward the disability label, she had to mention this to me:

Well, I really ain't been labeled as a disability, but I know that I have anger problems, so I deal with it by just like letting a lot of things go. Just like... look at like if somebody say something to me then I won't fight I just let it go.

Besides, as Monica stated, Renee does not think she carries the label outside of school.

It don't affect me at all outside the school. Cause I can just take a deep, when I come here I hold my breath. When I step outside I just like that big relief of breath, it just come out, cause it's like a sigh of relief from being outside the school.

K: I see. So you think you don't carry the label once you get out of the school.

No, cause in school people know you. Outside the school I am whole new me. I'm a different person. Nobody know about me it's like my rep is clean when I stepping outside the school. So, I don't really...how do I say it ...hummm....[silent for 14 seconds] So that's why I really don't like to come to the school cause people know you and then they gonna use that against you. Outside the school it's like nobody know you can be yourself, you can just take a deep breath.

Renee has accepted her label and the fact that she is identified as having a disability as long as her disability is context-bound—as long as her disability is limited to anger problems and within the school context. Her own schema of disability allows her to receive a disability label:

I think it's good to have my stuff label. Cause, now I don't have to wonder why I act the way I do. And I know now that I'm labeled I'm not the only person that you know go to the same like, hum, like I see other people have anger problem. I know they got the same thing I got. So it's not just... I mean it's good to know what I have.

She has made sense of her label and has radically transformed it into a *social handout*

(Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) that lets her know that other students who have the same

label have gone through what she goes through. She has transformed her personal

experience of disability into collective experiences that inform her of the historical,

social, and political commonalities shared by other students with the same label.

Presumably, as long as the problem is identified to be derived from anger, her awareness

enables her to reflect what she has been angry about and how to manage it. For her, what

matters is not whether she has a disability or not, but how she handles life circumstances

that have likely been the primary causes of her anger. Hence, her idea of who she is does

not have to be affected by the label itself, though the label may continue to let others

assume who she is.

I see [myself] an average person. Black. I know I'm black and I gotta live with it for the rest of my life. I see a young female who been through so much and that dropped the puzzle but I am picking up my pieces as I go. And I just see like this my big changes in me from I was back then. I got see no more. Assaulting on older people no more like that. I don't... cuss out as many people as I used to, which like disabili... I know I have anger problem but it's not gonna stop me from doing what I do. It's not gonna stop me from being Renee. It's not gonna stop me from hanging out my friends. It's not gonna stop me from anything cause I know I can control what I have. So I mean I am proud to know what I have and to know that I can control it. So I mean it's not.... That's they way I see myself.



Furthermore, Renee's transformation of her label might not have been made without her realizing the gradual changes she was making that allowed her to see opportunities awaiting her. She has not only transformed her label, but she has also converted the special education services she receives into a stepping stone on her way to her pursuits for academic and vocational successes. She recalls that she was not able to see any tangible benefits of sitting in different classrooms or receiving services relating to her special education status.

I mean... I was still doing what I was doing, whether I was in the class or not I was still catching attitudes, still getting into fight, still I was doing what I wanted to do. And I was saying like why are you putting me in something that is not gonna help. Then I realized like this class is helping me because I've been finding myself calm a lot quicker calming myself down a lot quicker than I used to do.

I asked her how or when she began seeing the change in positive ways.

Mmm, I guess I just woke up and just see my big change in me. Like, it's a new day. You gotta start over. You gotta get yourself together. (...) I don't know I guess, I just mmm since I found out at first I was not trying to do about it but now I am, so I can see like a big turn around my life like I'm not just quickly go off any more. I'm not quick to tell you what's gonna be done and what ain't gonna be done. It gotta to be a big change.

I then asked her if she could evaluate the services she was receiving and describe their helpfulness or unhelpfulness, if any.

Ah, ok. This is helping me cause without it I don't think I will be passing my classes. Like I am now like I will probably be off track fallen off somewhere, but it's helping me because not only that classes but teachers are there to pick me up whenever I fall. So I think it's doing a whole lot, means a whole lotta good, my mom think so too.

As far as my talks with all the girls are concerned, Renee was the only girl endorsing both the label and the meaningfulness of the services she was receiving. I listened to her as if I was trying to find a clue or an answer for how label and special education services can be relevant to and meaningful and empowering for the educational needs of young females facing multiple life challenges. Recognizing the need for redefining and reconceptualizing her label and special education services, Renee's transformation sounded as if it not only spoke for the other girl participants who shared similar life experiences, but also emancipated them from being locked into the traditional conception and assumptions of disability and its labeling system. Renee then shared this story with me:

Hum, the reason why I say that it's also helping because none of my family went to college. Nobody....Nobody in my family went to college. Like my grandma, she didn't go. My aunt didn't go. My mother didn't go. My dad didn't go. My dad is strung out on drugs. My mom stays and my step father but me and my mom don't really get along. My aunt is strung out on drugs. (...) My uncle is strung out on drugs. My other uncle is strung out on drug. (...) So like nobody went to college. Most of them didn't graduate from high school. So I see like this. If they would have the same opportunity..., I see what I got from this opportunity. Like I don't have to be like them, I can go somewhere and be somebody. So I think that this is also like a good way to tell people. Like if you got somebody your family didn't do, think this is your opportunity for you to do it.

I had no words to say to her. Nodding was the only thing I was able to do to let her know that I was listening. She continued:

At one time upon my life, like I gave up on school. I had stopped going to a school for like a month. I gave up. But I was talking to my grandma one day, and she is a Christian. And she was like, "I want you to do something you know before I die. I want you to make me proud." And I was like, "What's that?" She was like, "Well, nobody in the family is successful." Nobody really. So, she was

like, “I want you to go out and I want you to be somebody, make your name worldwide, make it known.” So I was listening and she was like, “You need to get back to school” and my aunt said the same thing today, cause if it was up to me I wouldn’t go to school. She was like, “Go to school, do your work, be somebody.” Every morning I wake up in a mirror Like my mirror is like really big and I got like... this picture sitting there of my grandma and I look at the picture and it’s like I can hear the same word to me in morning, like, “Get up, get dressed, go to school, get up, get dressed, go to school, do something, do the work, don’t your mouth back at the teachers cause I want you to be somebody in the family. We can say, oh she’s successful. I want you to make me proud before I die.” So I think it helps me.

I still remember how I felt when I was I listening to her. She gets up, gets dressed, and comes to school. Very importantly, as Renee indicated, her radical transformation of her label and the services she receives is actualized as she finally met some teachers at the current school who really care about her, her work, and her future. Renee emphasized that special education services can be unhelpful if . . .

If they didn’t have nobody who really cared about your situation, it wouldn’t be helpful. Cause then, Ms. Banks, she don’t look at it really as disability cause she be always boosting me up and make me forget about it. So, I’m saying if you.... they don’t have people who....didn’t care about it, and then they would make it non-helpful, cause then students would walk around as if they was actually, you know, special.

I observed Renee in Ms. Banks’s classroom several times. It was easy to see how Ms. Banks enjoys working with students coming to her class and how Renee trusts her. Even when Renee’s mouth is running more than it should, Ms. Banks remains calm and knows how to work with Renee. Ms. Banks is laid-back but solid in her philosophy of working with her students. One time, she told me she believes that teachers have to meet their students halfway rather than expecting their students to comply with them all the time.

Interestingly, when I asked Monica and Renee about a quality they wished their teachers had, both girls responded that they wanted their teachers to meet them halfway.

Finally, I also asked Renee how she thinks special education services could improve. I asked her to share her opinions with regard to under what conditions students would *want* to receive special education services and let others know with confidence that they were receiving them.

Like, when I grow, like I said, I want to be successful, and people say how you will be successful, I want to tell them about special education services, they can help you to do that. And so maybe that come with like oh if they helped her they can help me. But then I gotta realize you just...it just cannot be the educational services that help you. You gotta want to help yourself too. (...) Like I'm..., you can't help me just by putting me in a certain class and give me special services. You can't help me, but I have to also help myself. So I can't rely on just special services I have to also help myself. I have to come outside the box, so.

On one occasion, Ms. Banks told me that she felt Renee might not have had to be labeled as emotionally disabled. She noted that if a label must be ascribed to her behavior it could have been socially maladjusted, so to speak, rather than emotionally disabled, because Ms. Banks met some of Renee's family members and saw that they talked and acted in a manner very similar to Renee. Ms. Banks, however, saw how special education services were helping Renee in her attempt to make a history that none of her family members has created thus far. I was able to see the mutual understanding between Renee and Ms. Banks that made Renee's radical transformation of her interpretation and the label and experiences of disability possible.

From the start interviewing with my participants, I continued thinking about the considerable effects of age as a starting point of experiencing disability, being labeled as one with a disability, and receiving services relating to the label in schools. While disability and special education conceptually go together as a set of the cultural symbol of inferiority, maturity in terms of age may let students see the services given as a commodity that pushes them forward. Renee was now at a stage of life transition where she was approaching high school graduation and was soon going to leave the things that had happened in school behind and step into another life stage. Her being labeled relatively late in her school years might have allowed her to see the commodity of special education services in practical ways. This also has an implication that if students are to be labeled early in their school years, special education services must be planned and implemented in ways in which they never feel isolated, devalued, or unserved.

I won't look at it like, man, I got a behavior problem. It's only a problem when you act on it. That's when you know that you got it, when you act on it. Once you get over it, you like let things slide, like it's not a disability, it's just a problem. That's how I see it.

I have observed how Ms. Banks interacts with Renee and how she speaks of Renee. It sounds to me that Renee has internalized the possibilities that Ms. Banks sees in her. How Renee sees her label embraces how Ms. Banks approaches her label and tries to see what Renee has been going through from Renee's perspective.

### **Recollecting the Experiences of Disability**

What turned these girls' rather negative experiences of disability into positive experiences was highlighted by two particular factors: positive experiences in special

education classrooms and positive interactions with teachers. When they felt they were respected and understood, and when their educational needs are addressed in a way that made them feel someone cared about their future paths and goals, they called their experiences of special education positive. Conversely, when they did not have such perceived personal attention and actual sense of being cared about, their experiences of disability remained negative or, at best, neutral.

As Renee portrayed, this positivity felt enables students to transform the traditional conceptions of a disability label and cultural assumptions attached to it. It can further let them realize that “I am not the only one who goes through this.” Optimistically, this political awareness can be used as a guide for young females facing multiple life challenges in their development of a sense of solidarity, which has the possibility to help them to transform their life experiences. It goes without saying that without the awareness and understanding of personal and political significance of disability experience on the side of educators and professionals working with young females with disabilities, the personal and political transformation may be difficult to attain.

None of my participants who shared their experiences of disability in detail named disability as a core identity or any one of their identities. The fact that none of them wishes to call themselves disabled seems to reveal the nature of the existing social practices where identifying oneself with disability for young female students is likely to make them feel embarrassed or anxious about others’ judgments of them.

Is there any condition that would let young females positively name themselves as disabled with confidence? By positive, I mean, for example, I would say that I have a positive Asian identity because I am positive that I am not the one whom the normative cultural images of who Asians would inform who I am. I have my own conception of Asianness. Likewise, if I say that I have a positive identity as disabled, it means that I am positive that the hegemonic conception of disability does not represent how I experience disability. When I say this, I also know that there are other disabled individuals who do not yield to the hegemonic conception of disability. When I say that I have a positive disabled identity, I see my disability personally, as well as politically. A good example of the identity based politics may be illustrated in deaf people naming themselves deaf and not “hearing impaired.” This identity politics makes it possible to say that other people are out there who would relate to and understand what I have gone through. I am positive that the system ability/disability system exists and continues to subjugate people who are identified as having a disability.

In this sense, Renee’s understanding of the political significance of her disability label can be framed within identity-based politics where the recognition of the existence of oppressive social systems shaping the everyday life experiences of marginalized group members has come to be “a source of strength, community, and intellectual development” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). Monica’s rejection of the ascribed disability label may also illuminate her counter-hegemonic standpoint that perceives the overriding effects of a disability label on her self-concept. Interestingly, their positivity not only appeared to have made them resilient but it also seems to make them find special education services

to their advantage in their own pursuits for academic and vocational success. This suggests that redefining and transforming a disability label seems inevitable so as to empower them through the possibilities that special education services can offer. Perhaps the greatest challenge in doing so for school age persons who are identified as having a disability is that the ability/disability system and the act of labeling held and carried out in the school system is power-ridden in nature. As Renee's stories exemplified, empowering and emancipating young females with disabilities through transformative practices is possible. Yet, unless educators, professionals, and any adults who work with young females with disabilities on a daily basis willingly join the transformative practices and redefine their own hegemonic conception, young females who do not subscribe and yield to their disability labels may only be perceived as being in denial of the truth or the fact that they have a disability.

Furthermore, questions still remain with regard to how students who are identified as having education-related disabilities and/or mental disorders are able to transform their labels. That is, unlike Renee and Monica who are able to take both their disability labels and the ramifications of the labels off as soon as they step outside the school, other participants, such as Lavon, Adoncia, and Nicole do not seem to have the concrete boundaries where they are completely free from the normative gaze on their disability labels. For example, Lavon, Adoncia, and Nicole have been receiving counseling or therapeutic treatments offered through the juvenile justice system. As long as the treatments offered are grounded on the dogmatic, hegemonic conception of disability, they are framed within the assumption that something is wrong with them and that



plausible solutions are to ameliorate their individual problems. Opportunities for redefining and transforming their disability labels and their experience of disability may remain limited. This seems to imply the inevitability of the redefinition and transformation of disability at the societal level so as to create broader environments that facilitate the empowerment of young females with disabilities.

**Research Question 3: In What Ways Do Disability and the Intersecting Social Categories, Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Social Class Contribute to Adolescent Females' Perceived Constraints or Strengths in Achieving Academic and Vocational Success?**

In contrast to the first research question, wherein I tried to understand the social condition of my participants in a broader context, in the third research question I placed my primary focus on their experiences within schools. As my talks with the girls continued, I began noticing particular themes recurring in their stories. Although this may sound contradictory, the recurring themes were not simple representations of what were common thoughts or behavior patterns among them. Instead, the recurring themes were found to be the manifestations of the complex social realities which each girl made sense, interpreted, and acted. This seemed to demonstrate the existence of the intersecting oppressive social forces within and across school contexts. The three themes that emerged include: (a) Like everyone else, (b) They know where I'm coming from, and (c) Push me harder.

### **“Like Everyone Else”**

To a great extent, this study is ethnographical in nature, for I observe any social and cultural phenomenon in the American society through my outsider's standpoint. Over the past years, I have noticed how persons of color from different racial and cultural backgrounds express their othering experiences in a common way. That is, I have heard many times from persons of color how many similarities they share with their white counterparts rather than how they are different from them. Those persons included my colleagues, youth in a correctional facility, parents of young persons with disabilities, school teachers, professors, correctional officers, and judges, to name a few. I have rarely heard the similar expression of struggles for sameness from people with the majority racial or cultural background. This has convinced me that people who are historically marked with otherness continuously are reminded of and signified with their differences, whatever the differences have been.

I also recall a youth who I originally met in a correctional facility asking an officer if African American kids were more likely than their white counterparts to be discriminated against. The officer asked the youth why he felt that to be so. His response was because almost all students whom he saw in a classroom in a correctional facility were African American and that he never saw as many African American peers in regular school classrooms. The youth did not seem as though he was accusing anyone. He sounded as if he just wanted to know if his observation was correct. This is one way for youth to learn where they and those who share the same frame of references are positioned within larger social formations; they learn through their daily observation how

the society treats people located in different social and material relations differently. A feeling of “I am different from others,” therefore, is not always a mere self-perception. It also reflects the social reality in which each person sees how they are different and how they are treated in particular ways.

Not surprisingly, my participants’ stories about what goes on in schools, social institutions, and cultural sites that maintain the status quo are illuminated by their continuing negotiations and renegotiations of their marked otherness. When the topics of conversations focused on their school experiences, they convinced me again and again that dealing with being perceived or judged different is painfully difficult for young female students at multiple margins. As a result, their motivations or decisions for actions are often driven to become like everyone else and do what everyone else does.

For example, Jade reflects that her past years as a student were not always positive. Known as an intelligent young woman, Jade expects herself to excel academically and do the best she can. She describes herself as a very determined, smart student, and she feels that she can accomplish things if she wants to. Her enthusiasm in learning and a desire to prosper can be an advantage as she can receive more personal attention and high expectations from teachers. Unfortunately, however, wanting to excel in school does not always make students feel welcomed by their peers. In school, students must negotiate what they can do and how they are perceived by their peers, and how their performances academically and behaviorally are evaluated by their peers. In many instances, peer acceptance and peer approval can have tremendous effects on students’

ideas of what they should do and how much they should do. Jade talked about her inner conflict of being and staying a good student.

Hum, I think I can really do all my work if I put my mind to it. Hum, I'm kinda like a teacher's pet cause I really love teachers, I think they put a lotta work into the students sometimes, but hum like the teachers here they can be okay but myself as a student I'm a very good student. And I'm really....I can do my work.

Well, it was kinda hard to be a teacher's pet cause most people they was like, oh, she's a teacher's pet, and it was like you know, oh she's not gonna be anything, stuff like that, she's the one, you know, they was just saying bad things. But you know I still gotta be the same way. Hum, and I just tried my best, you know and it was kinda hard, you know keeping up the work so I wouldn't drag myself down because of the teacher. But I did end up being you know one of the teacher's favorite or the person that teacher said they were always at their work, so forth, so on.

Her self-portrayal of being a teacher's favorite reminded me of how Ms. Christie described Jade before I actually met her. Ms. Christie told me that having Jade as a participant would be to my advantage because she was very smart. Ms. Christie added that Jade was her favorite client, and assured me of her radiant personality. Nonetheless, being a teacher's favorite caused her to go through a difficult time while she was in regular schools. Monica, another participant, also mentioned once how peer pressure can be an obstacle to students' academic progress.

I have a brother. And his name is Randy. And it's like you know like it's like he's smart. But when it comes to school, he don't wanna act smart because he's got friends and you know like he want act, tough and be like, I don't care about school, you know, just cause here basically peer pressure. But he knows how to do his work and he knows what he's doing. He's smart but like its like he gets around his friends and his friends don't care about school, so he don't wanna care about school you know he try to fit in.

Although Monica provided an example of her brother, she observed that this can be true for both girls and boys. This phenomenon may be described with the so-called *acting white* thesis. For example, among scholars who discuss this phenomenon, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) noted that academic achievement, defined as a privilege or characteristic of whites, makes African American students less likely to perform well in school, as it conflicts with their cultural attitudes. While their thesis has been criticized and reinterpreted over the past years, recent studies (e.g. Fryer, 2006) confirmed the relationship between academic achievement and popularity, where the popularity of white students increases as their grades increase, whereas students of color with high grades are found to be least popular among their peers. Being a good student and being popular has not been an easy task for students of color, especially those who attend highly-integrated public schools (Fryer, 2006).

The difficulty in attaining both high academic standing and popularity was evident in Jade's school experiences. Jade added that being a good student was not the only reason it was difficult to get along with her peers. When it comes to popularity, peer approval has immense power over students' performance. In giving more details on how her school experiences were negative, Jade stated

Well, it's just like a general statement but hum being picked on. Hum I was like, my mom, she's older person. She's like 50. And hum I was like she always like dressed me like older, like I was like, what...12, 13 years old, and I wore like grandma clothes and get a little grandma curls and stuff like that, and people always picked me. And hum cause I was smart and they picked on that it was like I was a nerd, stuff like that. It was ..., so that's how I failed twice, and that's also a negative experience I had in school. Because hum I was trying to be you know trying to impress kids and you know stuff like that so I failed twice.... So I failed twice, cause I was trying to get myself up there with them which they were really

this low, cause I was making good grades so, I was trying to be a laughing stock, and I was trying to pull jokes on people and ended up getting suspended. So, getting picked on and failing twice, was probably the baddest experience I have had.

Jade described that out-of-trend appearance also was another target for ridicule, and indeed, the cruciality of appearance for peer approval was echoed by other participants. For example, Andre told me how appearance can be an important everyday issue for female students.

Well, my friend, Rhonda, she say hum people pick on her all the time because the way she dress, cause the way she do her hair stuff like that. I grew up with her and she had to be in my group home. And so she like doing what I do she like wearing what I wear. Like if I wear blue on white she wear blue on white. Like what I got today like blue on white, she gotta the same thing on. (...) Yeah, but she happy as...as the way she are. So, she just don't worry about it. But when she get the van we talk about how people pick on her and stuff like that. So I told her, she just dress right, she do what she is supposed to do, she shouldn't have to worry about nobody picking on her. So, only time people pick on you is if you doing something stupid or if you... NOT like, gotta the right type of hairstyle, you wearing some ugly, you wearing some, something like that. Somebody else got or they start saying stuff to you or something like that, Like if you hair just out of place and not straight, it's nappy. They going pick on you. So, you try your best and keep on trying your best, people still don't appreciate how you dress stuff like that. But I done got to a point, I really don't care. As long as I know I like myself, I'm ok.

In fact, her advice on Rhonda came from her own experience of being picked on when she was in regular schools.

Yeah. I used to get... People used to pick on me all the time. (...) Like...you get put down...like stuff that you like to wear..., the stuff you like to wear and stuff. Like how you fix your hair, what kind of shoes you wear, stuff like that, so.

Andre recalled how much energy she had to spend to impress her peers. She kept picking fights and being in trouble because she was offended by her peers' negative comments to her. Some of her peers would say something to her and she would react to them, which caused her to have a number of suspensions. As other participants also agreed, Andre found it very difficult to stay focused on her work when she was being picked on.

Given that being picked on can be antonymous to being unpopular, it is not easy to tell someone about being a target for ridicule. Telling someone about it is admitting to him or her that they are not popular. I asked Jade if she had anyone whom she could talk to about being ridiculed. She said that she did not talk to anyone about this and held everything inside. I then asked her if being made fun of or picked on affected her school behavior in any way.

Oh, that...actually that affected me a lot because hum I couldn't concentrate cause you know people kept on making fun of me. Hum, I had to be always worried about you know, oh what this person thinks or what this person thinks, you know, it really was kinda like I was in a bind, and it really you know really hurt my education cause I was always trying to please people and trying to you know live up with their expectations when I really needed to live up with mine.

Jade's comments reiterated what Andre said. They had to worry about what others would say about them. They tried to impress their peers so as not to be targets for ridicules. My participants have indicated that the school culture of protection and survival has a subculture: in order to avoid being a target for ridicule, girls put other girls down. This put-down behavior may be perceived as jealousy as my participants have suggested that jealousy is the primary reason for fighting other girls. I asked them about the reasons girls fight. They gave me the same answer: boys and materials. Lavon described

this in a simple way; “I got these shoes, she wants these shoes.” Jade’s and Andre’s stories made me wonder if girls’ put-down behaviors may also be motivated by their needs to protect themselves from being picked on.

Jade and Andre’s stories also convinced me of the arguments by recent feminist criminologists that the existing school system is hard on students who have fewer material resources. One of my participants had a history of being charged for larceny. The stolen goods listed were cosmetics, which appeared to be a “must” for young females. This is not to say that all students coming from low-income, working families are deemed to be targets for ridicule. This also does not mean that students from better-off families can escape being influenced by the fault-finding peer gaze. What I find problematic is that this is a social reality of American public schools where the fundamental structure reflects the social and economic hierarchies of the broader society where people are likely to be judged by their income, appearance, possessions, and social status.

It was interesting to notice that when the topics of conversation were focused on being picked on or fighting, social class suddenly became as an important factor for being perceived or treated differently. During an interview with Adonica and Jade together, I asked them if they ever thought about how their own social class status affected their school experiences or opportunity structure in any way. Over time, Adonica and Jade became confident enough to talk about more or less sensitive issues ranging from race, ethnicity, and class to different kinds of social injustice that hampers young females from believing in their capabilities to achieve their academic and vocational goals. Therefore,



our talk became more casual, though the topics themselves might not be easy ones to discuss. Adoncia identified herself as originally coming from a low income family and started sharing her thoughts and experiences of being a young female coming from this background.

It's really sad because I see other people at school you know having all this you know fancy clothes. This was when I was in elementary school. Now I'm coming from middle class family. And I'm going back to the middle class family. So, I look at everybody else, I be like Damn! Look what I am dressed in and look what they are dressed in and I feel like really bad and the teachers treated me differently because I came from low income family. So they looked at other kids like, say there was a year book. They give everybody a little paper except me. Because they knew I couldn't afford it. So it was like really, really sad, like I came home crying, because kids were picking on me and stuff like that.

I asked her how she handled the situation where she saw she was the only one who did not receive the little paper.

I used to be bad. I cussed the teacher out. I really did. I ain't gonna lie. [said this as laughing hesitantly]

Even though Adoncia's verbal behavior might not be justifiable, I wondered why her being singled out had to happen. I know that I sound so innocent posing a question like this. During my fieldwork, I have met several teachers who told me that they bought uniforms or other school materials for their students who were not able to afford them. It was Illich (1971) who contended that in spite of the equal opportunity that schools pledge, students from low income families essentially lack most of the educational resources and opportunities that are available to students from middle class families. Illich argued:

These advantages range from conversation and books in the home to vacation travel and a different sense of oneself, and apply, for the child who enjoys them, both in and out of school. So the poorer student will generally fall behind so long as he depends on school for advancement or learning. The poor need funds to enable them to learn, not to get certified for the treatment of their alleged disproportionate deficiencies. (Illich, 1971, p. 6)

Listening to my participants' stories about experiencing social class kept reminding me of Illich's argument that compulsory schooling results in reproducing social polarization. My participants' stories seemed to indicate that the basic social structure of public schools has not changed for more than 30 years. At an early age, Adoncia saw a social reality where everyone except her had the same opportunity.

Jade also shared her perception and thoughts about social and school practices based on social class.

Yeah. Hum, well....most ...I've never been, hum I've never been in a high income. Cause my mom, she really....she doesn't really perceive herself as, not being poor but she doesn't perceive herself having high income either cause she's not all that financially stable but hum, hum, let's see... like I would say the most from...most part is middle class family. As a young female you know, I did...you know, people got treated different. Or, ...I got treated different because you know I wasn't up in the high class so I can't hang out with high class people. And it was like the teachers were giving the high class people more respect and more dignity than the lower class people or the middle class people, or the middle class, or if you were a middle class person, like I see myself as being you know I just like okay you are barely, you are barely making it...so.

When asked how she can tell people from upper class receive respect and dignity more than those from lower classes, she responded:

Cause like you can see it. Like, it's like ...you really can see it. Because hum you know when you have like people you know, like say you ride the bus. And you see just kids get off is like...big mansion basically house, and then you are in the

school and you see the person in the school, and teachers give that person all the respect, you know they may have....they can buy expensive lunches, you know, and you see people you know coming from the high class receive, get all the respect, it kinda hurts you cause you're like I'm just a middle class or I'm just a lower class person, I wouldn't get treated with the same respect the high class person, and that kinda hurt the person...hurt my feeling....so.

I then asked her if they had friends from a rich family, whether the class differences would make them feel any pressure to hang out. Adoncia responded immediately.

Yeah, because like their family looks me differently. Like I may have the best friend, that's like I did have the best friend that was like from high class... income. So, whenever she invited me over her family, would look at me like I was damn. Like I was NOTHING. And it hurt me cause I cry a lot. I'm a very sensitive person. I've been sensitive since I was little. And I went home to my mom. I'd be like, they treated me bad.

I asked her what her mother said about this.

She said it's okay, everybody is not fortunate.

These are their perceptions and reflections of how people treat other people differently on the basis of their frames of reference. Economic disparity and differential treatments are socially accepted through everyday people's equanimity that everyone is not fortunate. It was indeed interesting to see the social realities through my participants' analytic lenses.

As an example, the free or reduced lunch system in public schools was one of the school practices that I had never experienced or known in my home country. Therefore, I seldom have given thought to how students would give meaning to this practice. Jade's remark caused me ask one of my colleagues if students who receive free or reduced lunch could be targets for any kind of ridicule, or if they could be perceived differently by their

peers. She said that it can depend because in some schools more than half of the students could be receiving free or reduced lunch. However, she said, it surely could in some schools because it tells the economic status of their families. Although educators may see free or reduced lunch as a mundane practice, when these mundane practices are perceived by students, the social meaning may be more profound than the school system intends to deliver. Economic disparity is observable in many aspects of school practices.

Jade also mentioned the word *respect* in describing what those from lower class are less likely than those from upper class to receive. As protection and survival recurred in the narratives of my participants, respect also became apparent as this was something that really mattered to my participants. When my participants and I were talking about what young females living in today's society want, their responses were almost identical. As a young females, they want understanding. Monica's comments represented their thoughts.

Humm, I don't think I can speak for all of them but for myself I want understanding. Cause I feel like nobody understand what I'm saying. Nobody don't want to listen. And I think most girls are like that. They want somebody to listen and understand what they're saying.

From the standpoint of young females of color, however, they show a striking contrast in their responses. Respect became their primary choice. Monica remarks:

Respect.....Cause I don't know, you know, some, some black females, they do get it but like if you just walk around this hallways, they don't get it. To me, they don't. I know couple of them don't feel like it, cause a lot of them don't get respect, just they feel like if you don't get respect or if you give respect, but this is not. Equal respect. Somebody give more respecting you cause they are white. Or stuff like that.

Jade echoes:

(...) Respect. Hum, segregation again, cause hum black women get treated different then white women. Hum, equality. Those are probably main ones.

They also shared their opinions about what young females of color do not want. For example, Jade remarked:

Mmm.....hum, they don't want disrespect, they don't want to have what is called hum they don't wanna be stereotyped. Hum, black women are stereotyped. Really. Probably, that's ....race, black....race and gender are stereotyped most. You know. Normally, black young women have babies, hum, they are always violent, stuff like that. So, they don't wanna be stereotyped. That's the main one I would say. they don't wanna be stereotyped.

Renee thinks:

Hmmm... they don't want to you know see girls as walking around thinking that they all that, or they got, they better than you, or their standards is higher than you. They don't want stuff like that. They just want everybody to be on a basic same level.

From the standpoint of social class or race, my participants feel that young females of color and/or from low income families are not as respected as their white counterparts. Gender is surely a factor in unequal school and social practices, and race, as well as class, simultaneously and differently create social conditions whereby young females at multiple margins are likely to be treated differently.

Very importantly, besides social class or race, age as another social system is found to be a lens that enables one to see the nature and quality of social treatment in schools. I had a group interview with Monica and Renee. At a point in our interview, they

shared their thoughts about how communication becomes an important factor for students to cooperate with school rules, policies, or directions and instructions given by teachers and school personnel. As I was listening to what Monica had to say, I was recalling how Michel was treated by her teacher at the alternative school.

And I feel like you can't do that. You cannot co...to me personally you cannot come up to me and tell me you need to get what you need to be. Don't come to me like that. Cause you are a human and I'm a human too, and if you come to me with disrespect, it's just a natural thing for somebody else to get disrespectful too. So, and then might be like I'm adult and you are a child. That doesn't matter. (...) I'm not her [a female teacher] child. NO. NO, NO...That's how I feel. No you're not goin' yelling at me and get out in my face to tell me what to do. Now I understand you're my teacher and I should respect what you want me to do. But you ask me to do with respect. (...) Cause you want me to do, then ask me with respect, and I feel like why am I doing this, she be like cause I asked you to but I'm asking you to explain to me why.

I asked Monica when she felt respected.

I feel respected when you talk with me the same type of way you want me to talk to you and you listen to me when you treat me like not as a child cause I'm not a child I mean I am not grown but I am a young adult. When you treat me with that type of respect when you treat me that way I feel like I am respected, you know, when you listen to me, when I tell you something you take it seriously, you know, like you just treat me like I'm a human just like you are. In that way I feel like I'm respected.

The reciprocal way of showing respect also was stressed by Andre.

Well, in school [the current alternative school], they [teachers] care about they respect and we respect them. So this school right here, this school the teachers in this school, I can say these teachers in this school are good, cause they respect kids, you respect them. If you don't respect them, they don't respect you. That's how I feel. (...) They are, like, they are respectful, as long as you respect them they respect you. I don't like no teachers that hold a grudge on you and nothing

like that. (...) Old enough for you to respect them, you gotta give respect just to get respect.

My participants illuminated the ways in which they observe and experience multiple levels of differential social practices toward them. Sometimes, they are compelled to see their otherness through direct interactions with peers and adults, and other times, they see it by observing how things go in particular ways that make them see that they are different.

***“Dare to Be Different”***

Jade wrote a poem and shared it with me. With this poem, Jade showed a paradoxical expression of her continuing desire to be perceived and treated like everyone else. She tried to accept her differences or more precisely the differential treatment she receives.

*Dare to be Different*

I walk with my head up high  
Not worrying about what no one is saying  
Wanting to kiss the world good-by  
Because these days the world is not playing

Dare to be different, do not be the same,  
The truth will set you free if you agree to change  
Be your own trend setter from the words of Ciara  
Life will move on, Life will be better

Dare to be different, try some new things  
It's ok to cry, to dream  
Hold on to faith it will surely make you prosper  
Me growing up to be that nurse or dat doctor

Dare to be different!

Through the formal interviews and informal conversations with Jade, I learned that in the past several years, Jade hoped to go back to a regular school mainly because the alternative school did not give her any challenging academic work. She wants to get a real education. More importantly, she wants to do things like other students do and be perceived as a “normal” student.

As Jade described, receiving the doubly negative peer gaze was a tough part of attending public schools. The magnitude of the difficulty was intensified when she was treated differently since her mental health conditions were known to her teachers. During earlier interviews when I asked her about her special education status, she only mentioned that she had never received any kind of services relating to special education. However, as our interviews continued, she explained more in detail. She told me that she received psychiatric diagnoses when she was in the sixth grade. She called them as *mental illnesses*. According to her, they affected her school performance in a significant way. For example, one day when she was in the eighth grade, she acted out so badly that she hit teachers and then passed out. Therefore, she had to tell teachers that she was diagnosed as bipolar and ADHD, which were her diagnoses at that time. Jade decided to let them know about this, hoping that it would help her to be understood by the teachers.

When she came back to school, she found out that she was put on a behavior plan. She also recognized that the teachers began looking at her as “a whole different person.” The way the teachers treated her was dramatically different from before. She then learned that the plan seemed to suggest that she be placed in special education classes for students with emotional problems. She described the time period: “That was about to



change my whole world.” Retrospectively, she now thinks that she could have benefited from special education services. However, at that time, special education to her was something that she thought would block her future paths because of the negative stereotypes and images attached to special education. I asked her how her mother thought about or took action for receiving special education services. Jade said that her mother did not want her to have a special education label. Jade and I talked about the possible benefit of receiving special education services. However, the deep-seated images of special education did not let her mother connect her intelligent daughter and special education. Additionally, Jade said that she reads and speaks very well because of her mother, who made her work very hard. The capability that Jade demonstrated did not let her mother see any benefits that special education could offer her daughter.

She [the mother] doesn’t really want me the EBD now. Hum...., she doesn’t want me to be in special education. She wants me to learn just like everybody else in a learning environment.

During my final interview with Jade, she told me her mother wanted her to successfully complete her general education and was planning to relocate to a different state so that Jade could make a new start. In the state where they currently live, the educational opportunities available to her seemed to be limited. Jade’s mother would force Jade to work hard and to have grandma-clothes and curls even though doing so would make her feel different from the rest of her peers. Throughout the interviews, Jade expressed her strong desire not to be judged on the basis of the historically negative racial and gender stereotypes. Her desire to be accepted and treated like everyone else did not let her have

another marker that signifies her difference, even when she anticipated possible benefits that she might have received through special education services.

During my fieldwork, I had opportunities to talk with professionals in local educational and community mental health agencies working primarily with students who are in need of mental health services and their families. Through formal and informal conversations, I noticed that there was a particular cultural theme held by those professionals, producing their own scripts of how help offered should be accepted by their clients. For example, suppose a mother was told by a school or mental health representative that her child would need special education services; if she declined the services offered it is likely that those agencies consider that the mother is in denial of the fact or the truth. It would be perceived of the mother that she should forget her pride. Listening to Jade's story made me wonder if Jade and her mother were perceived to be in denial of the truth. What I find problematic in the professional scripts is that these scripts are made based on the hierarchy of credibility, which can trivialize the underlying reasons why some students and their parents do not wish to accept the services being offered. These scripts did not seem to critically attend to the negative ramifications of the built-in assumptions of special education on the decision-making processes of female students and their parents such as Jade and her mother.

***“I Want to Live My Life, Like Everybody Else Does”***

Andre's story also illuminates how her desire to be like everyone else was manifested in her decision-making. My participants suggested that among the social categories, the cultural view of disability as slowness prevailed in everyday school

practices. Their stories also highlighted that being perceived or judged as different could have significant effects on student behavior.

For Andre, there was something very unique to her experience of special education services. It was when I asked Andre questions relating to disability and special education services that I noticed she did not seem to think that being served in a special education program was conceptualized as having a disability. Even though her files indicated that she was receiving special education services, diagnosed as having a mild intellectual disability since the second grade, she did not recall receiving services relating to special education while she was in a regular school. She did not express that she had the experience of being pulled out and placed in resource or separate classrooms. She might have been, but as far as her experiences were concerned, she did not. She told me that if she had to be pulled out while her classmates stayed in a classroom, “I would feel like I’m missing out of everything.”

Andre did not know or did not seem to know under which label she was receiving special education services. This made it difficult for me to ask her how she experienced disability. It did not make sense to her. One thing that she could clearly tell was that educational services she was receiving at the alternative school were by far the best educational services she had ever received. She thus called the services “special.”

Simply stated, she lived in the material environments that were supposedly arranged for students who were identified as having EMD. However, she did not have the experience of disability. It is possible that Andre did not want me to know about her special education status. If this is so, it means that she emphatically did not want me to

know about it, because as far as my interactions with Andre were concerned, she is the type of person who says what she means. She was retained when she was in kindergarten and she told me about this, describing herself, “I was too bad.” This is why I assume that she does not know about her special education status. Or, more critically, there is a possibility that she was underserved during the years in regular schools. The fact that she did not have any memories relating to special education services does not mean that she does not know about special education services. She knows what an IEP is for and she actually talked about how she and her mother usually discussed the IEP before school meetings.

Considering the length of time during which Andre has been receiving special education services, her not knowing about her disability or special education status was surprising. In fact, for the first several interviews, I did not know that her label was mild formerly EMD. Because of time constraints on Andre’s interviews, I began interviewing with her before reviewing her student records. I also had been told by a teacher that Andre’s label was SLD. When I finally had a chance to review her file, I realized that Andre’s label was EMD. Then, when I saw her scores on standardized tests and then visualized the flatness, I realized the dehumanizing effects that the label of mental retardation has carried. The flatness can overshadow Andre’s wit, which made me laugh so many times. Her thoughts and insights impressed and amused me, and I caught glimpses of her sweet personality. Several teachers and school personnel actually told me that no one could tell that Andre’s label was EMD. Yet, how Andre was perceived by people who work closely with her would not allow the label to be removed.

According to a teacher at her school, who informed me that Andre's label was SLD, Andre refused to receive any accommodation for end of grade (EOG) testing. This made Andre fail it at least once. When I later heard that she would have to retake the test I felt very sorry for her. However, at the same time, I understood why she refused to have any accommodations. It was not possible to discern the extent to which material environments arranged for Andre in middle school affected others' perceptions and attitudes toward her. I was not able to find out how often Andre's being picked on related to her special education status. At least I know that at her current school, Andre does not have to worry about being picked on. She does not have to worry about how to impress others. She does not have to worry about how others might make judgments about her. She now feels that she is treated like her peers. Even though she has a disability label, she does not feel disabled. Maybe that is why she does not feel that she needs accommodation. Then, she failed because of her refusal of being accommodated. Is it Andre that failed or is it the system that failed her?

The teacher stated that Andre was in denial of her needs and that she had to forget her pride. I have learned over time that Andre does not mind working hard. In fact, she was described as a hard worker in her student file. I do not think that she was in denial. When asked her about her goals she responded,

I think I want to get a real job, get out of the group home, get my own place, go to a college and you know graduate, get married, and have a little kid, live my life, like everybody else do.

I think what she refused was how others would judge what she could do or could not do. On many occasions, she expressed her desire to do things like everyone else does. Now she feels that she is treated fairly and wants to believe in what she can do.

The examples of Jade and Andre uniquely represent how the system of disability affected their decisions and the consequences of not taking advantage of special education services available to them. Jade and her mother refused the opportunity so that Jade could be in a learning environment like everyone else. Jade indicated that being labeled disabled would make her already marked differences official. In the case of Andre, her desire to be like everyone else may have grown over time as her official disability label might have been a factor in receiving constant ridicule from peers. Alternatively, Andre's desire to be like everyone else may not have had to do with her disability label or special education status at all. Being picked on constantly may have been enough for her to feel that she was different.

Recalling how my participants talked about their experience of disability and then reflecting how they experience other social systems in schools, it seems to suffice to say that each social category makes them see how equality is unequally distributed. Each social category makes them see differential resources and opportunities. When these social categories intersect and work as multiple systems of social oppression, my participants have presumably been compelled to recognize greater hurdles for obtaining educational and social equality.

One thing that distinguishes the social system of disability from other social systems is that disability in schools necessitates its label for its differential treatments,

official and legitimate. Even though special education services are supposed to assist students who are identified as having a disability in learning and achieving like other students, the social reality that my participants experience still makes me see the opposite outcomes.

### **“They Know Where I’m Coming From”**

I have discussed that being misunderstood is the most common feeling permeated throughout the participants’ narratives. For some girls, the built-in cultural assumptions about disability or gender are visible factors that make them feel misunderstood and mistreated. For other girls, it is negative stereotypes attached to particular races or social class that marginalize them. They try to figure out what makes them different from the rest of girls, but it is difficult for them to understand exactly what makes them misunderstood, invisible, and unheard. However, they hardly ask others why people misunderstand. Instead, they keep asking questions of themselves.

For example, Adoncia’s poems below illustrate the continuing and painful self-inquiry and reflections on her inner struggles of why she is not understood as she really is.

*Why do I cry all these tears!*

Why do I cry all these tears  
I may never know I may never  
Find out but the least I can do is take a guess!

Why do I cry all these tears  
Maybe cause I have been abused  
Maybe cause my moms gone  
Maybe cause I am not w/ my family

Why do I cry all these tears  
 Is it because I am not w/ my friend  
 Is it cause I have other sexual preference

Why do I cry all these tears  
 I think I just answered my own questions

*Why can't I be me*

Tell me why can't I be me  
 A Latino girl who likes to play football  
 A female of color  
 Go somewhere w/out somebody judging me

Why can't I be me  
 People judge me by the color of my skin  
 The texture of my hair  
 The color of my eyes  
 Why is that so

Why can't I be me  
 A gurl finally who doesn't let it all hang out  
 Why can't I dress different w/out somebody saying something  
 Tell me  
 Why can't I be me

Adoncia was scribbling these lines as if she was frustrated with the fact that she has more questions than answers. At the facility where Jade and Adoncia were placed, not only Jade and Adoncia but several other girls voluntarily showed me their poems. Many of their poems were the expressions of their anger and sorrow over being misunderstood, prejudged, and abandoned. The poems also highlight their desires to be understood, cared about, encouraged, and viewed as being strong and successful. It was daunting to see the sheer fact that girls from different families, schools, cities, and states share similar past experiences of living in adverse conditions and have similar feelings about their future.



This fact alone suggests the pervasiveness of the feeling of being misunderstood among young females at multiple margins, or conversely, the pervasiveness of their desire to be understood and accepted for who they are.

Thus far, I have not discussed in detail the offenses with which each participant was charged. To some extent, it is because the types of charges are not the primary focus of the study. It is also because a number of studies already profile the characteristics of young females in the juvenile justice system explaining the behavior or academic characteristics of the students in need of special education. Making additional *cases* does not seem to be of importance, unless their charges are regarded as focal points to interrogate the nature of societal perception, attitude, and treatment toward the cultural behavior of young females who are brought into the court system.

However, it is not true that I did not think at all about their delinquent charges. The formal and informal conversations with them kept me thinking about what makes them different from young females without disabilities, or those who are never in trouble with the law. The apparent differences are manifested in the official disability labels and the involvement in the juvenile justice system that presents their delinquency history, and it is these official markers that arrange their material environments in schools and in the juvenile justice system. Yet, devoting an ear to what they have to say, I only came to recognize that it is not they who are different. What *really* makes young females with these official markers different from those without markers is the extent of understanding held by others and society about the complexity of the life circumstances with which many young females with these markers have to cope. Or more precisely, it may be not

the lack of sufficient understanding held itself but the lack of will, desire, and imagination to understand why the social realities of these young females are shaped differently from others.

As Adoncia's poems highlight, what makes it difficult to live their lives with their multiple marginalities is the complexity of their social realities that force them to carry heavier baggage without many people acknowledging it. It is therefore not surprising why they identify particular individuals as the most helpful persons for this particular reason: *"They know where I'm coming from."*

Succinctly, the participants have lived in conditions where they have not only had to negotiate their multiple social identities in schools for their own protection and survival, but they have also had to deal with many issues in their homes, while having few resources or power to control those issues. When they have issues in their homes, it is very difficult to prioritize their school work over those issues. They go back and forth between their schools and their homes as if they live in two entirely different worlds.

For example, recall that Renee described that by stepping out of school, she feels that she can take a deep breath because for her it means leaving her disability label behind. Renee, however, also identified coming to West Central high as the best school experience because stepping in the school means that she can temporarily separate herself from issues going on in her home.

Best experience? When I first came here. Cause I've been wanting to come to this school for longest, longest time before I finally came here. I was like, I am in West Central, I gotta blend in with the people. So when I first came here, it was like I made friends like that. It was the best experience cause I made friends like off the wall.

I asked her what makes West Central special.

The people. My friends. Hummm the teachers, some of them. The principals. Like in morning when I have a bad day and then I come to the school it's just like West Central just take all, everything I have to deal with at home just take it away and bring me happiness when I come here. So that's why, that's why I like coming to West Central in morning.

For students like Renee, transition does not begin at high school graduation. Her transition from one world to another world takes place every day. As long as she has a few good friends and supportive teachers who know what Renee has been dealing with, it is worth coming to the school, even though school is often another battlefield for her. Renee stated that without people who know her life circumstances and keep encouraging her, it is easy to let issues at home drag her down. Equally, without people who know why she struggles behaviorally and academically, coming to school is not an easy thing for students like Renee.

Jade recalled that her best school experience happened when she was in a regular middle school.

It was when I was in a middle school. I was a basketball player in the school. Cause being my height. So, hum I was hum..., everybody knew about my situation. Everybody knew I was in a group home. Everybody knew that I was treated bad. So, hum, they had like.... a just little thing from my basketball coaches, they brought me hum... they brought me gifts. And they was so sweet. Both brought me gifts, my basketball coach and the assistant basketball coach. It's kinda hard, you know, think about them cause you know.... It just kinda....you can never forget about them.

A feeling of being understood is accompanied with a sense of "I am okay as I am." For Jade, who always felt as if she had to be somebody else to be accepted and recognized

and who moved from a school to another school many times, having someone who understands how hard her life conditions have been was one of the few positive experiences she had while being in regular schools. Jade, as well as Renee, indicated that issues at home can be huge constraints in achieving or wanting to achieve successes academically and, in turn, vocationally. Therefore, for example, if Renee use the phrase “they know where I’m coming from” she means that people whom she knows not only listen to her and try to understand her without judgment, but they also try to understand what is going on in her home without stigmatizing her as well as her family members, who are dealing with those issues.

The following story was told by Allison. Although her story of being in trouble with the law cannot represent what all of my participants have experienced, her story is a portrayal of the nature of the struggles of young females who are brought into the juvenile justice system and the circumstances in their homes.

The first interview with Allison began in an irregular fashion. Allison was attending the same alternative school, the Beachside Youth Program (BYP), where Andre was also placed. When I started interviewing Andre, I was told by a lead teacher that Allison was not willing to talk to someone about her experience because of issues going on in her home. Therefore, for a few weeks, I visited the alternative school to only talk with Andre. I then heard from the lead teacher that Allison seemed to want to participate. Allison might have heard something from Andre about how interviews were taking place. At the initial meeting, Allison looked a little anxious, but after she agreed to participate and our paperwork was done, she voluntarily began sharing her story. I did not have to

ask any questions to encourage her to talk. She framed her own story of what she wants others to know about young females living in challenging life conditions.

Allison began her story talking about how staying in a group home has changed her. According to her, there were two options in her treatment plan in the juvenile justice system; one was going to a training school, another was living in a group home. She told me that her brother was also involved in the juvenile justice system and had a possibility of being referred to a training school. However, he was also in need of mental health treatment. Because of this he was referred to a group home instead of a training school. Allison thought that the option given to his brother sounded better and easier for her as well, so she asked if she could be referred to a group home.

I'm like .... Because...hum....before I got out of a group home I was bad, bad, bad, and then I had a court date coming up. (...) I went ahead and got in a grouphome about 3 or 4 weeks before I had my next court date. And... hum I had to stay at the grouphome for like a month before I even seen my family or whatever. But I'm glad that I went in the group home because it changed me a lot. And before I had been in a group home I had been locked up or whatever.... juvenile detention center. And hum, I had been arrested a couple of times and I had been house arrested like, hum you had that thing on ankle, hum.... And...when I got in the grouphome, I really didn't wanna abide by those rules but I knew the quickest way for me to get out the grouphome was to do good, so I followed the rules, I started coming to school here before I got in the grouphome.

So, I was used to school but the grouphome seem weird, but they was really nice. And Ms. Lisa was working there. And she was really nice or whatever, I got to know her cause she stayed there from like 4 at the afternoon to like 12 o'clock.

And as the first month went by I was doing okay. And then I got to go home for my first visit and I did good at home and then I came back, and then I started taking this, hum like this class. Hum, that's like...hum they cut it out, I don't know why, it's like, they.... Before your act, it was a class something like that. Mental health put me up with it or whatever or the judge make me to take or whatever. And hum it was really good for me because it was a lot of things on how to think before you act and what think before you act meant. It was really,

REALLY good. And I just listened to it and I got the point of it. And if you really think before you act you do a whole lot better. And hum, the end about 3 months when I was in the group home, I was doing, I was doing really good. They really didn't have, never have problem out of me in the grouphome. Hum, at school they never have problem out of me. Hum but when I first come in here I got in like a fight. Like the first day. I just.... I don't know and then when I was in the grouphome they gave me a lotta time to think to myself or whatever about how I wouldn't wanna have this life style cause I wouldn't never get nowhere if I wouldn't make no good money or nothing. So.... I just decided to grow up whatever.... and to make good choices before I ended up in jail and stop doing drugs and all that stuff, cause it's not good for you or for your body.

And then for about 4 months, they was already telling me I was looking at getting out of the grouphome cause I was doing so good. So, it was like GOOD. And then I got out and then I was in the summer program, I don't think you should like get out of the group home just....there you are out. I think you should have some support while you get out. And they still...I still.... Well....I don't have any like counseling people. Like Ms. Tatum, she is in the office and that's who I talk to. And....but the grouphome was good. They did a lot of group activities together. That's one thing I wanna be working with girls or people and I just had to learn how to control it. (...) So, the grouphome was really good. It was really good. I'm glad I got in the grouphome. It was like the best thing that ever happened to me. It was the grouphome.

K: Can you give me some examples of what was so good for you?

The support. And having somebody talk to you and just realizing that I have to grow up. And be...I mean, be mature about the way life was and I don't know, it's just the way the grouphome, I knew that if I didn't straighten up then I would be headed down wrong way so. I just went ahead and did it. I mean, you've got to be willing to do something good. Like you can't just go in there and say, yeah I'm getting out and so and so. You've gotta really want to and have....and just I don't know, just the people...I don't know, it just....it was good for me. Because I was in a better environment...was the main thing. Because before I went my mom and dad used to do drugs and I was doing drugs. And I just cause I got clean or whatever, and that was the main thing, being off drugs. It's good for hum a teenager to be off drugs they shouldn't be on drugs because the way it affect them

I first.... like when I got on ...when I started smoking weed I didn't think it affected me or whatever, but I started seeing that I was getting in trouble a whole lot more, and I didn't know what it was, it just...when I smoked it or whatever, I felt bad, like I want to go out and do stuff like bad thing. I don't know why either,

I guess ...I don't know it's crazy. But I'm glad I got off of it and I went to the grouphome cause it was so good to me. And when I got out they still....I mean, everybody that I worked with, my teachers, the school, the mental health. They all are supportive. They are. They all are always positive, never negative.

And when I went to home I just tried to stay away from things like old friends. Like I knew if I went back to old friends then I'd be dragged back to the same thing. So, I didn't wanna do that so I had to change friends. Actually, I really don't have any friends now. But it's better than ...It's better not having any friends than having friends doing drugs and bad things. I mean, I'm not saying it's their fault that I did the things I did, because it's not. It was my own choice. But...hum...I don't know, maybe I'd be quicker to be drawn in the stuff that I did than..... I don't know. I just would rather this because I know if I went back to the same friend that I'd be drawn back to the same stuff. But...I...hum...I know it couldn't be their fault cause they didn't put a gun to my head and say, you know you gotta do this or kill you or whatever. But it was my choice. You make bad choices in life but....but you have to learn from your bad mistakes. That's what I think ...and I just wanna learn because if I knew if I kept going down the same road then it'd be like for the rest of my life.

Before I got in the grouphome, I was making bad grades. I never wanted to go to school, and then when I got in the grouphome, I started making good grades, I attended school, every day when I was in the grouphome. I don't think I ever missed a day in school when I was in the grouphome. But since I've got.... I miss days because when I first stepped in the grouphome, they put me on sleeping pills and then right before I got out the grouphome I stopped taking them cause they started making me nauseous and then I didn't take them for longest and then I've talked to my social worker and told her to put me back on me on them so I can go to sleep cause I've been staying up to like... and I guess my body got immune to it or whatever staying up too late, so hum I told her I needed some sleeping pills cause I be going to sleep around 4 o'clock in the morning and I couldn't get up to go to school. And therefore, while I stayed there I down at my grammie's after I got out the grouphome and I stopped going to school because she needed help around the house and she was bad off or whatever so I stayed there and like started coming back to school.

I continued listening to her and posed several questions only when she looked at me as if she wanted me to ask her questions.

K: Can I ask you, for instance, when you are in detention center or when you are out of school, the fact that you are not in the school or not getting education..., what... how did you feel about not getting education when you may have needed it?

Hum.... [took a deep sigh] backed in....when I was on drug, I really didn't care. I didn't WANNA go to school.

K: Hum... Were there any reasons that you didn't want to?

Hum.... I don't...the fact that I just wanted to stay out and just smoke weed or whatever. And that's.....

I noticed that I asked a question to which she was probably not ready to respond.

Therefore, I re-shifted my question to her life at the group home. I asked her as if to reassure her that she started seeing things differently since her stay in the group home.

Um-mmm (Yes) I mean, but I still.... I still keep in mind of what they taught me in the grouphome. And being in school, knowing that they have a bunch grouphome kids in the school, they do like group activities and they still talk to us. (...) And it's just the grouphome that is really good. And they are so good to kids. You have 3 meals a day, 2 snacks, you get to go places, hum maybe like every Friday we go out to eat something.

(...) And the grouphome I was in, it just, we get attached to them or whatever, it was so nice. I mean, all the co-workers that used to work over there, all the staff members, I loved them all. Cause they were so supportive and they listen to everything you say and they just help you anyway they can, and when you ask something and they get it for you, when you ask them for help they are there right there.

Of all the participants, seven girls had once or several times lived in a group home. Of those seven, four girls—Lavon, Nicole, Alexis, and Andre—were living in a



group home during my fieldwork period. In many cases, juveniles are ordered to live in a group home for disciplinary reasons or because of their home environments, which are evaluated not to be in the best interest of the child. In the case of my participants who were living in a group home, their reasons for their stay in a group home sounded like a combination of both reasons. I have visited three of the four group homes for interviews or for meetings and learned that each group home has its own atmosphere and philosophy, though their rules and regulations may be fundamentally the same. I did not have a chance to visit Allison's and Andre's group homes, but I had the impression that their group homes are remarkably supportive and youth-oriented. I did not hear similar reactions from Lavon, Nicole, or Alexis. Allison's descriptions of her life in a group home sounded as if she received something she had needed to reflect her past, present, and future. I told Allison about my honest reaction to her experience at her group home.

K: It sounds like you really were in a really, good, good, I mean, great group home.

Yeah, that is the main thing. Oh, goodness, this is so good for kids at my age. I mean, I know a girl that was in there for about 3 months and then she's still in there but I just she's only like 10 or 11 but I still hope that she's straightens up and takes everything in. You just gotta.... You just gotta realize that you just can't live life like that. You have to straighten up before you are in jail or something. (...) I mean, it's not everything you want in a group home. It's not family, it's not your home. But it helped you a lot.

I just had to learn that I just had to learn from my mistakes and not doing them again. Just pick up where I left out. And just keep going and not look back. You can't feed it off for what you did yesterday. You have to look forward cause it's just....and life is a whole lot better now....that I'm clean and it's just a whole lot better.

I told her that I really appreciated her sharing the story and that it is very helpful for me to learn what many girls living in difficult life conditions have to endure.

Well... if it helps anybody that was like... I was then I would want them to get better before they messed their life up. It couldn't change, it was too late. But I mean, I had been in the court maybe 3 or 4 time... not even that mmm...like hum maybe 5 or 6 or 7 times and I had went to jail, I had been arrested like 3 or 4 times. Hum, I run from the law, I was under house arrest, hum, you name it, I did it. I just, I just learned from my mistakes. That's all you have to do and just realize you can't be doing that, and it's childish and you have to grow up. You need to have to realize that....that even though you make bad choices you can still make up for them.

(...) I wish...I wish...I mean, sometimes I wish I just go, hang out with my old friends cause I miss them. But....it really don't seem like I miss them that much because...of what they did...I mean, I know I miss them, but it's like, oh well, because I don't really have any friends, I mean I've got my boyfriend and my family and that's basically all I need. Cause I don't wanna be running, around and partying and stuff like that. It's, I mean, life is good when you just... you just gotta slow down. You can't keep living in the fast lane cause living in the fast lane you gonna be like that [Snapped her fingers]

In front me, there was a polite, friendly, and insightful young woman sharing her lived experience of being in trouble with the law and then had to “straighten up.” This is how Allison framed her own processes of making sense of the life prior to living in a group home and then of the life since she was placed in an environment where all the people whom she encountered and worked with were supportive. Until this point, Allison's story may sound as if the dramatic changes in her behavior patterns and future outlook occurred in a relatively simple order. Her story may sound as if it is one of the success stories of youth through institutional treatment and as if she was a quick learner. As our interviews progressed, Allison let me know that this was not the case. Borrowing Allison's words, she was hard-headed. During another interview, Allison elaborated more

about her past experiences of being a troubled student. It was when Allison and I were talking about why many youth in general now do not want to listen to adults, that she shared with me how hard-headed she was.

They have to want to ... it is so.. different for different people. Like it took, for me it took for a long time, the first time I was in 6th grade, so well actually, yeah, 6th grade and then 6th grade again, so it's like 2 years, and then 7th grade, a year, 9th grade, 7th grade, 8th grade, that's like 2, 3, hold on, 6th grade, 7th grade, that's like 2 years, and 7th grade, that's like another year, 8th grade, that was another year and 9th grade...Huh [turned her face back and look at a schoolyard through a window]....I straightened up in the end. So, it took me about 5 years to really understand that I need to do good, and do well and stay in school. It took me about 5 years just to understand that cause I was hard headed. That's how most people are. They don't wanna listen in the beginning, some...some of them might scare them like the first time to go to the court, get 3 to 6 months and then hum on probation and then that might scare a little bit of them. But the hard-headed ones just don't listen.

Allison said that it took five years to learn that she needed to change, and the changes did not occur until she began feeling that she had someone who tried to reach out to her and understand what she had to go through at her home.

During the seventh and eighth grade, Allison received special education services under the category of speech and language impaired (SLI). She did not seem to actually be aware that the services she received were considered special education services. As Allison indicated, her behavior was affected significantly by her use of drugs. I was not able to review her IEP at her current school because of her exit from the special education program. However, available records showed that while she demonstrated strengths in several academic subject areas, a number of problem behaviors in school and at home impeded her from making a full use of her strengths. It was also noted that Allison does

better in small group settings. Among problems listed were inattentiveness, lack of concentration, tardiness to class, absenteeism, use of profane language, fighting, and physical aggression. Her drug problems seemed to have been caused by her parents who started receiving treatments during the time Allison and her brother began living in different group homes. Like Renee, it sounded very challenging to stay away from the negative influences and consequences of parental use of illegal drugs.

Allison is very sensitive to others' judgment about her performance, including her academic performance. Although being pulled out was not a pleasant experience to her, being with a very small number of students made it much easier for her to ask questions without feeling embarrassed. In order to avoid feeling left behind and being a target for being put down, it sounded like Allison had to spend much energy to protect herself from teacher and peer devaluation.

And like most people in the class, I was like, they cut up or whatever, to make people laugh. I used to do that. And when somebody tell me I was just doing that to hear people laugh, I used to say no I didn't, no I didn't, and then when I started seeing people did it up here, I was like, yeah, I mean I can admit to that now. Because I used to really do that like make people laugh. I mean... getting in trouble when I started like the teachers were telling me like..., they're calling you names and you get mad and they start laughing at you and you just get madder, they're feeding off you. Like, what are you talking? I used to think people were crazy but I really started seeing that they really do like, people make you mad, just to get happy. Like do you understand what I'm saying? I never really thought that people really did that but they really do. And that's crazy.

Allison's self-comparison of *what she used to do* with how she looks back, reflects, and gives meaning to her past experiences often amazed me. There is so much to learn from her situated knowledge about youth behavior. It is unclear how and when Allison's

struggles with academics began. However, she indicated a relationship between problem behavior in classrooms and her avoidance to be perceived as being incapable of doing work. Her feeling of being left behind might have caused her to disrupt or to be disinterested in classroom activities, or her substance problem might have aggravated both academics and school behavior. It was when she was surrounded by people who were supportive that her hard-headed attitude finally began soften and open up to what others tell her.

Allison attributed her turnaround to the people working with her, including those in the group home and the teachers at BYP. It was same with Andre. Neither Allison nor Andre made negative comments about their teachers at BYP. After listening to a variety of comments made by my participants as well as youth with whom I have worked in the past, it is surprising that the students only have good things to say about their teachers. During interviews, Andre provided many reasons for her satisfaction with being placed in BYP.

Teachers, teachers are good. They explain the work we need to, they explain. So, they do that. (...) They know that we have problems too that we need to talk about. So about the end of the day we talk about our problems and stuff like that. (...) Well, teachers here, they are more patient. They understand that we have problems going on in our life. But the teachers in North Middle, it seems like you can't sit down and talk to them. It'll get back to other teachers.

Andre indicates similar life circumstances shared by students at BYP and the need to let out what they hold inside. The fact that their problems are not stigmatizing but understood enables Andre to more easily focus her attention on her school work. It is noteworthy that the fact that Andre is able to focus on her school work satisfied her and

made her evaluate the current placement as the best one. Her desire for depth of learning is facilitated and encouraged by the teachers.

Yeah, like the teachers [at BYP], you don't..., well, it's time the teachers get you to do your work. I want more time to do my work. Like now I am in this class [at BYP] and they give you more time to do your work until you FINISH with your work. When you finish with that, when you finish with the subject, you move on to another. It.... like these teachers at this school, they say, if it take you all day to do your work. We just move on to another subject tomorrow. See, so I like teachers that give us time to do our work. I don't like teachers [in regular schools] that you ask about two questions and then they say, "Come on let's move to another lesson." That's how some teachers is.

Andre's desire to learn in depth continued to make me think about how the current state of learning emphasizing outcomes and not processes. How many students have been deprived from learning opportunities in which Andre defines because of the teaching/learning-for-testing trend? I had an opportunity to talk with Ms. Ingram, an experienced special education teacher working at a local educational agency in the district where BYP is located, who was one of the individuals who assisted me in recruiting participants. She told me that since the enactment of NCLB, she has noticed changes in teachers' attitudes toward students with disabilities or those who perform poorly in regular classrooms. Many teachers are now likely to avoid having them in their classrooms because of the issues involved with the accountability system. Those students are too easily rejected in regular classrooms and are sent to alternative schools. She added a concern that the possible changes to the age at which students may drop out of school might increase the number of students in alternative schools.

There is much to say about student needs to be addressed in school from the standpoint of students like Andre. Because her need for learning is now met, Andre sees the different treatment she received in a regular middle school. I asked her what would improve learning in a regular school. She responded:

Well, if the teachers, like... go step by step on a work, go take time for students and go over it. Explain, show us how to do it instead just explaining one thing and just give it out to us to do it and turn it in. And then, when it be wrong, they look at us and say, "This is pitiful, this is pitiful. I thought I taught you how to do this."

Our conversation continued. Like Allison, Andre described herself as hard-headed and one who needed time to realize that she had to care about herself. This realization came as she gradually began finding herself being surrounded by a web of support in and outside of school. I remembered when I asked her to fill out a short questionnaire she selected tutoring as a needed service. I asked her about her thoughts about the characteristics she would hope to have for a tutor.

Well, respectful.....Hum...Let's see, ....somebody who is willing to help me move on, move further. Like somebody who help me look pass people when they say stuff to me. And like ...just like spend time with me like help me my homework or some...come to the school, sit with me watch me do my work or like talk to me.

(...) I don't want no tutor that is strict. If the tutor got to be strict to me...don't, no... no... I don't want no tutor if he or she is strict. You can't be strict on kids all the time. My mom, is already enough strict in the family today. Some kids get, some kids, hum... some parents are hard on their kids. We don't need nobody else to come up on us and be hard on us again and again and again and try to help us move on. If you be hard on us we can't move on if you be hard on us. (...) If you being hard on us you are moving us back. You are not moving us forward.

There is a belief among agencies working with so-called troubled youth that they are likely to have been lacking structured environments in their homes, and so arranging a structured environment for them is the key to improving their behavior. Another common belief is that unless the behavior of troubled youth is improved they will not learn anything in the classroom. My previous fieldwork site visits and observations in educational settings, particularly alternative educational settings, showed me that these beliefs are widely accepted in their practices. A point/reward system therefore was the primary strategy used by those educational programs to address behavior.

Interestingly, BYP was the only setting among the alternative or correctional educational programs I visited where neither students nor teachers mentioned a word relating to “point” or “reward.” For example, I often heard from students in different alternative educational settings that they must follow the rules or they would lose points and their privileges would be taken away. I did not hear this during my activities at BYP. As a matter of fact, neither Allison nor Andre said anything negative about their teachers. Administrators at BYP characterize their teachers as qualified teachers who go *above and beyond* to reach out to their students. My observations confirmed the quality of student-teacher relationships. It was easy to recognize that the teachers’ priority is their students. Through fieldwork, I have met teachers who were defensive and cautious about my classroom observations. For instance, in alternative programs where Michel and Nicole were placed, when students were not cooperative with their teachers, the teachers looked at me irritably as if to tell me that I was the one who made the students misbehave. Some of the teachers in alternative settings approached me after my classroom



observations to tell me how difficult it was for them to teach their troubled students. The teachers at BYP did not mind, or did not appear to mind who observed their classes or how their teaching skills would be evaluated. They led their classroom activities in the same way they do every day, meaning that if their students need to talk or ask something that did not relate to the instruction, the teachers let them to do so, whether or not I was there. The teachers prioritize something relating to students and their immediate concerns. When Allison and I were talking about her future goal, she mentioned that she was unsure if leaving BYP would make her happy. On one hand, she feels good about returning to a regular school. On the other hand, as most participants echoed, she knows that there are many distractions in regular schools, which is a tremendous challenge for them to deal with while staying focused on school work. Allison thinks it may be the teachers that make BYP special, and maybe this is why thinking about leaving BYP makes her feel sad.

I mean, the teachers, they might be teachers but they try to help. They don't just do their job and that's it. They care about the students. And the teachers get pushed around a lot by the students. Not like actually pushed but like verbal. (...) They...they get cussed out a lot and everything, they still put up to the kids and then...and then the next day...the teachers try to do something better for the kids, the same child that just cussed them out....5 minutes later, they are just as good as they can be to the kids.

Both Allison and Andre used to be hard-headed, and they continue to make great efforts to manage their behaviors so they will be able to deal with issues going on in their immediate environments. Allison's and Andre's self-descriptions of being troubled students often reminded me of Michel. At the age of 12, Michel already has numerous

school suspensions and several delinquent charges for simple assault against school administrators and personnel. During my classroom observations, Michel exhibited behavior similar to Allison's previous behavior, including being tardy, disruptive, and disrespectful. At the current setting where student behavior is monitored through a point/reward system, she receives harsher discipline as she keeps displaying inappropriate classroom behavior. It even appeared that Michel's every move was under the surveillance of teachers, counselors, and other personnel so that she has only two choices; either obey or disobey.

Some studies (e.g. Grindall, 2003) reported that school systems referred a large number of juveniles to the court system when those students' infractions should have been handled by school personnel and disciplinary procedures. Whether the nature of the school related offenses were problems with school expectations (e.g., truancy, malingering, absenteeism) or interactions with others in schools (fighting, verbal and/or physical aggressive behavior), they seem to demonstrate that schools are troubled and troubling sites for a large number of youth referred to the juvenile justice system. I do not intend to make a simple comparison between the schools I have observed. However, Andre's comments come back to me again and again and cause me to question the effectiveness of such disciplinary practices. Wouldn't such a harsh disciplinary gaze only be moving students back?

Before I completed my research activities and left BYP, I talked with Ms. Miller, a program manager of BYP. I asked her what the possible challenges would be for students at BYP after returning to regular schools. She named two possible factors, which

were identical to Ms. Ingram's observation. One is academics and the other is the school climate of public schools. I briefly mentioned that Both Allison and Andre have only positive comments about BYP. Ms. Miller appeared very surprised that the girls take what they learn at BYP positively. She looked very pleased. Ms. Miller told me that the director of BYP is always concerned about how well the program is doing for the students. Reports made by outside evaluators, of course, are available, but the director is concerned about how the students evaluate the services. I asked Ms. Miller what drives the teachers at BYP to go above and beyond to work with their students. She appeared to look for an answer for seconds and simply told me, "Well, we cannot understand exactly what our students are going through because we did not have to." She said that Andre, for example, at the age of 14, has already gone through a lot and when Ms. Miller was 14 years old she did not find herself in the same challenging life conditions as Andre is now. "So, we are just trying to do our best to help our students," she said. I also had a chance to ask Allison's homeroom teacher about the challenges he sees in working with students at BYP. He identified home environment as a possible factor that would make it difficult to work with these young learners because home environments are something that is out of the teachers' hands. He said that he can only understand that his students are dealing many issues in their lives and yet it is they who must deal with it and move on.

### ***Precondition for Understanding***

Ms. Miller presented an essence of what I would call a precondition for understanding "where I'm coming from" in this research context. One thought caused me to conclude that when my participants said "they know where I'm coming from," it

implied that they know that the persons whom the girls feel understood do not prejudge the girls based on their social identities. Their social identities are not used as representative heuristics to let the persons determine who the girls are. The persons embrace a basic understanding that their students are dealing with complex life issues that are perhaps greater than they can handle by themselves. This stance is shared by persons such as Ms. Christie, a psychiatric therapist working with Jade and Adoncia, and Ms. Banks, a special education teacher working with Renee, who are trusted by their students.

A conflicting finding is that within the researched context where the feelings of being heard, understood, and cared for has tremendous effects on young females' engagement in school activities, ranging from school attendance to motivation to being successful in the academic domain, race, gender, social class, and disability matter but at the same time they do not. That is, at the individual level, race, gender, or social class seem to have little to do with the quality of interactions between young females and those working with them. My fieldwork has revealed that being a female teacher does not guarantee that they will get along with their female students. Likewise, coming from the same racial background does not automatically make students and teachers of the same race work together without problems. Ironically, sharing the same racial backgrounds often appeared to be an impediment when teachers or professionals assumed that youth of the same race share similar value systems or particular cultural attitudes. In this respect, both in- and out-group assumptions and prejudgment constrained the extent of professionals' understanding of the youth with whom they worked. Sharing the same

social identities can make it easy for people to relate to each other, yet it does not promise that they have been given the same meaning to what they have experienced. It still requires them to make efforts to understand each other in spite of their shared frame of reference. Conversely, it is possible for teachers, or any adults working with young females, to reach out to their students or clients, regardless of their race, gender, or class, if they listen to the voices of young females and take what they have to say seriously. As Allison and Andre illuminate, this can help teachers help their students find strengths and possibilities within themselves.

At the same time, it is also shared lived experiences based on shared social identities that allow persons to understand each other better. The collective voices of people who share similar lived experiences shaped by the social systems of race, gender, or class cannot be ignored. They are indispensable to disprove erroneous historically and culturally built-in assumptions about a particular race, gender, social class, or disability. It is difficult to problematize and combat discriminatory school and social practices against young females at multiple margins and empower young females without referring to the voices of those who share a common social destiny. The awareness of one's historical and political position within the broader social context can help young females understand what actions need to be taken to empower themselves.

### **“Push Me Harder”**

When the participants took time to reflect and tell the stories of their educational experiences, their uniquely situated perspectives illuminated a range of issues and difficulties constantly interfering with their school work. Throughout the interviews with

the girls, their seriousness about getting education came to manifest itself in their feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the helpfulness of the educational services provided in their schools. The value they ascribed to education also was noticeable in their acknowledgment of needing a diploma for pursuing their self-identified goals. Ms. Banks once mentioned that even though many female students, such as Renee, keep struggling with ongoing issues in school and at home, as long as they continue to come to school, it means that they are still getting something out of education; otherwise, many of them could have dropped out as soon as they reached the legal age for doing so. Ms. Banks has seen many female and male students who decided to leave school before earning a high school diploma.

My participants' seriousness about getting an education demonstrates the degree of difference in opportunities for and accesses to education many people take for granted. That is, to many people today, high school graduation may no longer be considered an accomplishment. It may just be a passage without consideration of the possibility of dropping out. For the girls in the study, however, this does not apply. Perhaps they take education more seriously than those who do not have to worry about not getting through, because they see what getting education can do for them, and simultaneously, they see why it is so hard to get the education many of their peers take for granted.

For example, for Renee, who does not have many family members with a high school or equivalency diploma, graduating from high school is a great accomplishment. As she portrayed the conversations with her grandmother, Renee's efforts to stay in school not only mean to achieve one of her life goals but it also means to make a history.

She has grown up watching most family members and people in her neighborhood have difficulty making a living. This makes her see the necessity of a high school diploma to go beyond. When asked, she described how she thinks the school can help her to achieve her goals.

Like when I am on outside I look at there people, and I'm like these people didn't have the education. That's why they do what they are doing. And I see some people outside world, oh these people got education and that's why they got good job and good money. So, when I step in the school, I got two options. Either go to school and don't finish and be like some of these people out on the street. Go to school and finish it and be professionals like some of these people that's out here now. So school helps me like focus on getting out graduating and be like some of the professional people.

For students like Renee, greater support may be needed now than when they were elementary or middle school students. The more she thinks seriously about her high school completion, the less she feels prepared. Unprepared does not mean that she is not ready to graduate. It means that she needs clear step-by-step visions that can guide her to move forward. These visions generally can be provided by immediate family members, relatives, or family friends who already have created paths to follow. Financial resources are another significant factor that can make it easy to believe one's own capability to step outside the life space where one has been placed. When Renee described her thoughts about the special education services she had been receiving she emphasized that she would need to come outside the box. Renee is the one who is going to make the first path to walk, which makes her feel unsure about her capability. While she has future goals that she is going to pursue, she also clearly sees the barriers lying ahead of her as she thinks

of what she is now dealing with every day. Her desire to graduate sometimes is pulled back by the everyday reality that does not let her easily break the convention.

If I keep staying in trouble, and keep getting all these charges and keep going in the court. I don't even think I'm gonna graduate on time or I may not get accepted to a college that I wanna go to, or some may come up and just I don't know like I might get peer pressure...(...) I don't know it's like lots of stuff I wonder about.

Her everyday concerns in her immediate environment have great influences on her perceived opportunity structure. Her perception of the opportunity structure is further influenced by the historically negative racial stereotyping immersed in the social and cultural practices of schools and the broader society, which require students of color to make greater efforts to not only demonstrate their capabilities, but also challenge the cultural assumptions held against people who historically are marked as a problem. During my field activities at West Central, I witnessed how my participants continuously have to negotiate their conflict ridden collective identity.

Coincidentally, I visited West Central High on the day when Renee, Monica, and another girl got in a fight against some other girls. On that morning, I arrived there early, and so I decided to sit somewhere and wait before I contacted Ms. Banks, who had arranged a time for me to interview Renee. There were four chairs just inside a building where the main office was located. As I entered the building, I saw a young woman sitting in one of those chairs. I noticed that she was looking at me but I did not know why until she spoke to me and asked me, "Did you come here to talk with me?" I suddenly recognized that the young woman was Renee. I had not anticipated seeing her at the entrance at a time when she was supposed to be in a classroom. I apologized for not



recognizing her and asked her why she was sitting there. She started explaining that she got in a fight with other girls that morning, and she was waiting for her mother who was asked to come to school to pick up Renee.

According to Renee, one of her best friends was attacked by those girls as soon as they got off a bus. She apparently regretted that she jumped into the situation. However, the girl attacked was one of her best friends. She later told me during an interview that her best school experience was to be around her best friends at West Central. Therefore, she could neither walk away from the situation nor just watch her friend being attacked by other girls. Even though Renee looked upset, she still managed to tell me that she would be prepared for an interview the next week after she returned to school after a five day suspension.

Renee noticed Ms. Banks coming from inside to look for me. As soon as Ms. Banks saw me she told me that she was going to reschedule the interview with Renee. Renee looked relieved as she saw Ms. Banks and started talking to her. Ms. Banks told her to calm down and wait quietly until she returned in a few minutes. While we were waiting, Renee keep talking to me as if doing so was helping her to calm down. Then, I saw a group of women come inside the building. One of them was a young girl with a bandage big enough to cover up half of her face. An older woman, who was perhaps the mother or the relative of the girl with the bandage, started shouting at Renee, and Renee started talking back to her. Ms. Banks must have noticed Renee talking loudly. Ms. Banks came back in a hurry and told Renee to go to one of the small conference rooms inside the main office so as to avoid further confrontation.

Renee then took me to the conference room. There was a female teacher inside. Since the teacher asked Renee what had happened, Renee started explaining to her how the fight started. When Renee mentioned the name of the girl with the bandage, the teacher told Renee that the girl had been very well mannered in her classroom. Renee frowned and shook her head as if she was telling the teacher that that was not really who the girl is. The teacher stayed in the room with us for five or six minutes and then left the room for her next class. After talking for a long time, Renee finally looked exhausted and breathed a deep sigh. Being quiet seemed to make her worry about many things; her mother's reaction, her suspension, the possibility of not being able graduate on time, among other things. Renee was concerned that people would mistakenly think she initiated the fight. I asked her if she had had a chance to explain. She told me that she did, but everyone was calling her names as if she was the one who started the fight.

Ms. Banks came into the conference room and told Renee to take her materials home so that she could work on them while she was suspended. When Renee left the room to pick up her materials, Ms. Banks told me that she knows Renee will think through what she had done. Even though Ms. Banks remained calm, this incidence made her very concerned about Renee. She told me that Renee's problems are always situational. She said, "She is a smart girl so she should have known this."

It was during the interview with Renee that Mr. Robinson, a school principal, came into the room and indicated that he needed to talk to Renee. He then asked me if I could wait while he talked with Renee and other girls. I asked him if I could stay in the

same room while waiting. He said that it would be okay. Renee looked a little anxious about what was going to happen but whispered to me, "It's gonna be interesting for you."

I situated myself at the back corner of the room and observed the meeting regarding the incidence that Renee had been involved in with the other girls. For the first half of the meeting, several school officers warned the girls about a possibility of taking further legal actions if they continued causing problems. The girls still looked upset about the fight as if blaming it on each other. But at the same time they all seemed to know that they should not make the situation worse by saying or doing anything unnecessary. The officers told the girls to make sure to stay away from any trouble and left the room.

During the second half of the meeting, Mr. Robinson started explaining to the girls that he was going to put them on a long-term suspension. "But I didn't," he said. He told them that on the day of the fight, the entire school was a mess. Nothing was able to be done on that day because the fighting fed a number of students and small fights happened here and there. The girls in the room started talking at the same time to explain their own reasons for the fight. Oftentimes, he told the girls, "Freeze, freeze. Listen." He had to tell them to listen to him but at the same time he had ears to listen to the girls. According to Renee and Monica, the principal was well liked by the students. I understood why because of the way he communicates with the girls.

The principal told the girls that this year the number of fights was greater than last year. He asked the girls if they could think of three common things in these cases. One girl said, "He said, she said." Another girl said, "Girls." Renee said to the principal, "You look at me and I look at you." Monica said, "Black." The principal nodded. Renee

said again, "Because the majority in this school is black." The principal admitted that it was a black thing but he also said that the majority of students being black does not have to mean that black students always get into fights.

I noticed that the principal started talking in a more casual but caring manner. He said to the girls, "I am tired of breaking into fights. I am too old to try to stop your fights. My wrists were hurting, my back was hurting. My hip was hurting." The girls laughed but they seemed to be taking in what the principal was trying to say. Then, the principal asked the girls what the nature of fight was. Then girls who had not even looked at each other began looking at others' faces, and started explaining. Conversations among them began. As far as my observation goes, it was not gender but race that reminded them of who they are; ones known to have a risk for getting into trouble. Their fight not only negatively influenced their own reputations, but also possibly reinforced the negative stereotyping of their own race. They then have to try harder to stamp out the bad reputation and the negative racial stereotyping. Likewise, they also have to make greater efforts to be successful and to be recognized for their own accomplishments. They were reminded of a common responsibility between members of a group who share the same historical struggles to be successful. The reminder sparked their talk and their gradual conclusion. Renee initiated the resolution by saying, "I apologize ya'll." Monica apologized too. By the end of the meeting, all girls were smiling, telling Mr. Robinson that they would not make his back hurt any more.

I assume that racial talk such as this might not have taken place if all the people participating in the meeting did not have the same racial background. I felt that I listened

to conversations that I might not have been able to in other occasions where race is treated as if it is a neutral social category that no longer carries historical struggles. The conversation during the meeting made me ask Renee if her racial identity gives her any pressure to be successful.

I really do cause I feel like this school...this school is majority black. You got...you notice about school. You got white kids and Mexicans acting black and that doing the same stuff we are doing but it's hard being black cause they gonna see you as black and they gonna think you are supposed to act certain way. (...) It's like... hard cause you see black kids and they know you are in black school so they want you to act black, they want you to come to school and get into fights.

Of course, the way Renee sees and interprets the outer world cannot be generalized to other girls of the same race. However, this is one of the social realities that young females such as Renee must deal with every day. Moreover, just as the girls learn about negative cultural images about special education by seeing others' attitudes toward special education classrooms or students who are referred to those classrooms, they learn about negative stereotypes attached to their own races by listening to what other people evaluate schools which they attend. Monica recalled what she heard about West Central when she was transferred there.

(...) I think a lot, I think more African Americans drop out rather than Caucasians. I think more African Americans do. And like in West Central, a lot of those dropouts, especially black, because it's just like they get here and it's like they say like, I was said that at this school, more African Americans cause the most trouble. Like, we are commanders of trouble. Every time you see a fight, its black girls or black boys. So, like when I came to this school, it's just like ain't no purpose in being here cause teachers don't wanna help. They are gotta label put on them like they are bad, so they just quit. So, it is...I think it is.

Because of the negative reputation attached to her own race, Monica echoed Renee in how race can be a huge pressure in choosing and pursuing her career goals.

I do because well, not saying that you being like you know, white get you more advantages. It's not like that. I just feel like, in my personal opinion, I feel like, it's me being a black female that .... people won't see me as you know like maybe becoming a doctor or psychiatrist stuff like that. They won't see that. So I feel like it is like a pressure for you to do well and do good because people gotta look like, uh, she not gonna do nothing with her life. That's what I feel like, you know stuff like that. So I do feel like as a pressure cause I feel like I wanna prove everybody wrong, like I can do it. And I am gonna do it, so. It is, but I don't feel, I don't wanna say, I don't wanna make it seem like that cause you are white..., people think cause some white people get looked down on too, but sometimes I feel like it is a pressure for African Americans.

When negative stereotypes attached to a particular gender, race, and class intersect, getting rid of the negative stereotypical images is much harder. Renee stated:

(...) When you see a black girl you gonna say, Oh, see ghetto, she....you gonna assume how...she ghetto, she is supposed to act ghetto. So females got a lot harder because people going expect you to be ghetto and black they gonna take some kinda hood, rat, chick, from down south and all this. So....it's crazy.

They are conscious of their historical and social positions where they must make greater efforts, first, to obtain access and opportunities; second, to attain the same academic and vocational successes; and finally, to receive the same recognition as do their white counterparts.

I have discussed multiple levels of barriers that interfere with their school learning. Those barriers ranged from the competitive and hostile nature of the school climate to the negative cultural assumptions and images attached to special education or disability as synonymous to being slow and are found to be deeply immersed in everyday

cultural practices in schools. The girls had to learn that they must try harder to protect themselves and to be accepted by the society of the normative. In fact, they already had tried very hard to keep their painful struggles inside. They have been trying to stand strong so as to overcome obstacles and to strive while having few people understanding their invisible struggles.

In addition, issues going on in their homes continue to weigh down the girls. Most girls have been living in life conditions that are characterized by domestic violence, parental substance abuse, familial fragmentation, parental neglect, and familial criminality. These factors alone are huge hurdles that interfere with school learning. When family members are the primary sources of their concerns, the girls feel as if they are caught up in the middle, ending up sacrificing or compromising their desire to do well academically as not realistic or important. Nevertheless, the girls still desire not only to survive but to go beyond survival. The perceived constraints in their opportunity structure are salient in their needs to have role models, resources, or hand-on activities that allow them to visualize their own successes. Because of the complexity and magnitude of the obstacles that hold the girls back in their attempts to try harder to be successful, the intersecting effects of the social systems of race, gender, class, and disability are manifested in the girls' need to have someone to "push me."

***"I'm Gonna Do the Highest That I Can"***

Compellingly, even though Renee and Monica identified the huge pressure of being African American, ongoing conversations with them revealed that they do not want to simply submit themselves to the racial stereotypes and give up on their own goals.

Even though their multiple marginalities force them to make extra effort, they do not mind this because they know that they are the ones who are going to make it happen to achieve their goals. They just need something that constantly makes them believe that they can. During a group interview with Renee and Monica, they described for me the school climate of West Central. They told me that the reputation of the school was not always positive and that most school policy changes had been ineffective in making students come to the school to learn. I asked them the reasons for the difficulty in changing the school climate. Renee stated that it is because a majority of the students are African American.

We can't do cause we're black. That's why. You got a school that's majority black.

Unlike the usual, Monica did not seem to want to agree with Renee. She said, "I just....," but did not continue her talk. Therefore, I asked Renee, given the school climate, what types of students then can be successful in West Central. Renee suddenly changed her position and responded differently.

I mean, anybody can be successful. You got do, just do it.

Monica then agreed this time:

You know I mean, all that you have to do, do it. Anybody can be successful. You can do anything you wanna do.

Renee continued:



You gotta teachers in here telling you that you ain't gonna be nothing, and all these. Now you gotta do it, sure that you can do it. Anybody can be successful. .... It doesn't matter how you grow up, how your school grades are, you can be successful. All you gotta do it, just do it.

Monica added:

Yeah, and also like that's an excuse. Cause everybody is dealt a deck of cards in life, You just gotta know how to play cards. And people be like, "Well, I can't do this." You CAN do it. Thatt's how I feel. You can be anything. (...) You gotta your mind that you can't do it, so. I mean.... You can do it. Well, you don't wanna do it. You should never say, "Can't."

On one hand, they have lived in the social condition where they are exposed to the cultural practices that make them recognize the disparity in the opportunity structure. On the other hand, they do not want others to determine what they can accomplish. This is where the girls can think of their own race as a strength that persuades them of the importance of putting forth persistent efforts to go beyond the cultural stereotypes that preordain their everyday as well as future paths. They can use their racial identity as a stepping stone to make themselves believe in their capability to break new ground for their own futures.

This is the same for disability. Renee emphasized the fact that being labeled as BED does not stop her being who she is. Monica also does not want her label to stop her from believing in what she can do. Our conversation with regard to the conflict-ridden pressure not to fail as well as to be successful as young female of color extended to peer pressure and the disability label in terms of how her desire to be successful could be

affected by the disability label and/or others' reactions to her label. Monica decisively stated that it is all up to her.

Well, to me it don't matter what my friends feel cause they not gonna take care of me when I get out of the school. So I don't feel like...I feel like.... no ....I mean, I think girls are supposed to be more overachieving than men but at the same time men are supposed to have more than females. But to me, I'm an achiever regardless cause I am... be the one taking care of myself and nobody else won't take care of me so. I'm gonna do the highest that I can, try my best.

Like just cause my label, like I still do wanna be successful cause I feel like after I get out of school, these teachers are not gonna worry about me no more, you know just like so, you know I'm having a real life on my own now. So, just cause I got the label, I don't wanna let them keep me from being successful. And sometimes you know like, when you BED, like sometimes you know you do wanna go on a rage and be like, "I'm just gonna act up today" or "I ain't do nothing today." I don't think I've ever done that. You know, I haven't done that. But some days you know you just don't...really be in a mood in doing anything. So, I don't think my label got anything to do with my peer pressure and stuff so. Cause I have my own mind too, you know people be like well they pressure me into but you know what is right and you know what is wrong so I mean like I understand you know you wanna fit in but you gotta look out for yourself. Cause I mean If you do this you gotta think about the consequences. You know you can't think about them after you did. You have to think about before, so I mean peer pressure can but I got my own mind, so I know what is right and I know what is wrong. And if I do then I make decision to like they be like holding a gun to my head and say I have to do it, you know they just ask, and if I say yes, then that's on me.

And this is where she needs a little more consistent support while she is in school which will allow her to keep sight of what she wants to accomplish.

You know like I mean I think a conversation helps a lot cause you know it gives them a chance to get what's on their chest off. You know, just to talk about their feelings. Even if it's for 10 minutes it can make a difference. That's what I think. Most people just don't do that. I mean I understand you've got a busy day, but it won't hurt you know like may be on your lunch period, come get a student. You know that if you feel really needs somebody to talk with, bring them in here sit down, eat lunch with them, you know just something like that, so.

Just a little extra step. Just, well let me explain, okay like I won't mind if someone come to get me like after a day even I would come on my lunch period just to have somebody to talk to, or something like that, just a little extra step, like I'm not asking them to jump a whole football field, I'm just, take just a little extra step to help. It's like, we are so busy, we don't have time, but if you're a counselor, you're a teacher. I mean you know, I understand you are not here to listen to problems but even talking to them you know. Like everyday could open up to you and you know the students can feel oh she really wanna work with me, and may help them strive in your class or something, even if this is just your class, and maybe that'll get, okay if I can do good in here then I know I can do good in other class, so.

Further, Monica believes that the best benefit which she can receive from special education services is the understanding that students with disabilities, who always are together with lower expectations of their own abilities and yet are expected to meet the standards of the mainstream, normative standards to be *normal*, must make greater efforts to show what they can do.

I think they should be able to guide me like, I understand like, once I get outta high school I'm on my own, I'm in the real but like while I'm in high school like this is my last, I have two more years to go and that's it. And that goes by quick so I feel like they should help me you know like sit down with me twice a month and set up a study hall thing for me, make this required for me, you know like, well Monica, you can make a B in this class and nothing less, and just push me cause I feel like if I had somebody there to just push me, and push me, and push me, I'm gonna do it. But if people just like okay it's well a D, it's passing then..., Then to me, it becomes acceptable. But like I know that I can do better than D. I know that I can do way better than a D, cause I'm not stupid. I know I can do it, but it's like once you get used to making these grades you just feel like well I'm passing so if I just do the same thing I've been doing, I get out of it.

So I feel like they should push me and push me. I'm, like my mom, I mean she ...I mean she don't I mean okay like she feels like I can do better with my grades but she didn't do good in school neither, so she'll tell me well I didn't do all that good in school, so I can't force you to. But I feel like she can because just cause she did bad does not mean that I should do bad too. So I feel like this I just need somebody to push me and push me cause I mean like I can tell myself, come on

Monica you got to do better but two heads are better than one so if I have somebody with me and push me.

Like...just to push me you know they be like you can do it, you can do it, that's....like.... that's a big thing. Like if they didn't do anything else. Just to push me, like when I, like sometimes I'm like I can't do it, they be like you can, just keep going, keep going, that'll help.

During my fieldwork, I have heard so many times that troubled girls lack motivation and the will to be successful. I have witnessed quite the opposite. To me as a critically disabled researcher, what has been lacking is the societal lack of understanding of a number of thick walls which young females at multiple margins are expected to bump against and then break down without having sufficient supports and equal opportunities. As Allison visualizes her future paths she also perceives many obstacles. When asked if she has any concern or difficulty that she foresees in her pursuits of her future academic or vocational success, she replied:

Sure. Hum.... Like maybe I just get tired of all the stuff one day in high school, and I just have to keep pushing it. I cannot drop out because I mean I've heard of so many people dropping out. Maybe two months before they graduate. And you just gotta keep on, just don't give up, just can't give up. And things running in like maybe they might be a family member that dies in your family and like you just .... What would they want you to do.... Not ... not.....I gotta quit because somebody died in my family, but really think if there was alive what they want you to do. Just finish school and go do the best out of it and do it for them if nobody else and do it for yourself and think about like the world. It's expensive now, gas is like, what, 2 dollars and 50 cents or higher than that, 3... hum you can't live off minimum wage. 800 hundred dollars a month is not.... That's not good. Just 800 hundred dollars a month like hum maybe like 500 hundred a week is good. That's like, that's okay, but if you wanna have nice rides and a nice house and be able to take care of your family and feed them and make sure their clothed, that like 800 hundred dollars a week in this world if you want live nice and have nice things. And you've gotta look at that, you can't use... look at and say, yeah I want money. You have do something for money, you just can't look at the walls and look at the floors and think you are going to make money.

Being a white girl, Allison may have been excluded from the historically negative societal and cultural gaze on people of color. Yet, being white has not excluded her from experiencing the historically opposing social forces toward young females from the working class. Like all the other participating girls, Allison cannot think of her life without getting education which gives her a basic social mobility. This is how Allison keeps herself in school, and this is what she values in school and the education that it offers. When asked how she thinks school can help her achieve her future goals, she responded:

Hum... education and ....help in any way. The nursing classes, that will help me out in a college in the future. Hum... hum.... Just education. And I mean, and learning things, everyday, not even in school but everywhere, like here people skills, you get...knowing people skills good in school and that can help you out in new job and stuff like that. And you just....everything.....

And even the question before you just ask me like ...who knows... I'm not saying I couldn't get pregnant but I can but...I can get pregnant and but just because you get pregnant doesn't mean that you have to drop out of school because you might have a baby, it might be hard on you but it's your choice and then nobody do it but you. And I'm saying if I did get pregnant yeah I will go to school because I'll make sure my baby had a whole bunch of stuff that I didn't have. And I will....I mean...I know people who got pregnant and pushed it through school. And that's what you just have to do. You can't drop out because you got one problem. Just keep going cause.... it's... it can't better, Hm-um [no], you've got to have your education.....in this world.

Just as Renee and Monica make their race and disability the counter-hegemonic forces to make them keep trying even when ongoing life challenges strike them down many times, Allison sees strength in what she has made sense and given meaning to her own lived experiences. As Monica expressed, this is why Allison feels that she needs someone to keep pushing her so as to make herself believe in what she can do.

Yeah, hum I don't know if this, I don't know I got, hum Stephanie from Beachside Family center, she is like my case manager from where I was in a group home. I just didn't let her go, I kept her and I don't know, I just kept her and hum, cause I wanted to just like have somebody to tell me that I need to go to school or whatever I need to do cause it kinda helps....To keep me on task and on track.

Once again, if the girls' need to have someone on their side is perceived as dependent, which is one the stereotypical characteristics describing young females in the juvenile justice system and students with disabilities, then it is simply a disservice to them.

Perhaps one of the greatest barriers for the girls to overcome is their multiple marginalities that do not let them remove all the societal fault-finding gazes on their social identities.

During an interview, Alexis identified school dropout as one of the most serious problems that many young people today confront. Because of her past experiences as a victim of sexual assaults and kidnapping, she went through a crucial time period where she was hospitalized for suicide attempts. These adverse events prevented Alexis from attending school regularly, which made it difficult for her to catch up with her school work. Like Michel and Jade, once Alexis has an opportunity to give her voice, she can only impress others with her insights and brightness. Unfortunately, her ability to express her deep thoughts prevented her from being identified as in need of extra academic support.

One time, I attended a school meeting with Alexis's mother, Ms. Haywood. Ms. Haywood had asked me if I could come to the school with her as an advocate requesting an evaluation for possible special education eligibility. Ms. Haywood expressed her

concerns about Alexis's possible needs for special education services to school personnel and a juvenile probation officer. Ms. Haywood's concern was documented in Alexis's juvenile records. However, it seemed that her concern did not convince the officer to action. Ms. Haywood said to me that she had tried, and I was uncertain why Ms. Haywood was not able to complete the process. During the meeting, attended by four general education teachers and a representative of the school evaluation team, I saw the reality that Ms. Haywood had to encounter. All the four general education teachers told Ms. Haywood that Alexis was an intelligent young woman, but that she was just too lazy and she just needed motivation. Ms. Haywood was told many times how her daughter's learning behavior did not match with her potential. Ms. Haywood looked almost apologetic for her daughter's lack of will to learn.

I was in conflict between letting the teachers know Alexis's mental health condition as a possibly significant factor in her problem behavior and trying to avoid indicating Alexis as having "mental illness" if Ms. Haywood did not want to disclose this. However, I decided to tell them that laziness did not seem to adequately represent the difficulty Alexis had been experiencing. The teachers appeared to be annoyed by my statement of disagreement. The teachers showed their disagreement with me by repeating that Alexis was very capable of doing things and that she just chose not to. They also told me why Alexis would need a label when being labeled as disabled could only stigmatize her. I felt as if I was being perceived as the one who wanted to stigmatize her by requesting an evaluation. If I had not listened to how Renee found the possibilities special education services could offer, the teachers' statement of stigmatizing Alexis might not

have let me continue. I continued stating that Alexis was keenly aware of her needs in academic as well as behavior domains, which she had expressed during interviews. This seemed to prompt Ms. Haywood to decide that she had to say what she has to say. “I don’t want to make any excuses for my daughter, but...” she said. She began explaining to the teachers that Alexis had been suffering from mood disorders, which had been the major reason for her aggressive behavior at home and in school. This was where the teachers finally started considering a possible need for an evaluation, at least, since “It’s free of charge anyway,” as one of the teachers said. This reminded me of Jade, who told me that revealing her mental health condition opened up her opportunity for special education, but it changed everything after her disclosure. I witnessed Ms. Haywood standing strong with dignity for her daughter and for herself because she had also been coping with the same health condition. I knew how hard it was for her to let the teachers know about her daughter’s health conditions because she already had known what the cultural imagery of mental illness or disability had been representing.

Until this meeting, Alexis’s possible needs for special education had been overlooked. While not being able to be understood by most people around her, Alexis had been told to manage or control her anger, grow up, and move on. When asked her opinions regarding why many youth continue dropping out of school, she remarked:

I don’t know. I guess, time is getting rough now and that’s how young people are looking forward to just giving up, and you gotta giving up because that’s what most people expect for you to do is just giving up. And you can’t show them that.



I found these remarks very critical because girls such as Alexis, being unheard and misunderstood and trying to hold everything in, had been witnessing the oppressive currents continuously running toward her and her generation. For Alexis, one thing, she thinks, that helps her is:

Hum...inspiration. Like somebody constantly on them telling them, you gonna make it. Just keep on trying. (...) Anybody can inspire you and you feel about yourself.

It is easy to make judgment on Alexis that she lacks motivation. Yet, it seems very difficult for many people to imagine why young females such as my participants need someone to push them harder. Recall that Monica, Renee, Jade, Adonica, Andre, Lavon, Michel, Nicole, and Allison, have been perceived, judged, and disciplined for their own protection and survival in order to let them live in this world, particularly in educational settings. Sometimes, the hegemonic gaze on their disability labels is the most salient factor for their painful negotiations of who they are and what they cannot do. Other times, it is race, gender, or social class, which has reminded them of who they are and what they are not supposed to be able to. Their survival strategies often are expressed in the form of anger. Their perception of the ongoing social inequality toward young females at multiple margins also has been manifested in the form of anger. However, they are taught and treated to manage their anger as if getting angry was an irrational reaction to the multiple forms of social oppression. The girls are striving based on their remarkable resilience that lets them make their conflict-ridden social identities a counterforce to keep them wanting to be successful in spite of their multiple setbacks.

How many years will it take this society to tell young females at multiple margins that they no longer have to try to hold their painful struggles inside? How many years it will take for society to let their voices be heard without judgment, with a goal of understanding?

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study was to explicate how young females who are involved in the juvenile justice system experience disability as a complex social phenomenon. I attempted to accomplish the goal by critically analyzing underlying normative assumptions about disability and other social categories and positioning the perspectives of the participants at the center of the inquiry.

#### **Personal Reflections on the Study**

From the beginning to the end, the entire process of this research effort provided me opportunities to understand young females whose lived experiences were shaped by complex forms of multiple marginalities. At this point where I recollect the whole research process, I still cannot set aside the overwhelming sense of what it took to accomplish the research goal because of the complexity of the lives of these young females. This complexity of and my understanding of it were manifested in several critical ways.

For example, the difficulty in recruiting participants was one of the hardest hurdles that I had to overcome. Almost half a year of the struggle in finding access to participants demonstrated to me the challenges of conducting research with this specific population. After all the interviews and interactions with my participants, or I should say that because of the reactions I received from the participants through the interviews and

interactions, I now feel that without devoting an ear to young females at multiple margins little can be done at the individual, institutional, and societal levels to transform these young females and empower them to believe in themselves and their potential to accomplish their goals. Importantly, devoting an ear to young females is essential if institutions want them to know that support is available to them.

Throughout the fieldwork, I witnessed conflicting realities that young females were likely to confront on a daily basis. For example, I observed the uni-dimensional view of the institutional approaches to girls' *problems*, which resulted in providing ineffective or counter-effective services, even when the services provided were well-intentioned, that is, designed to assist young females living in challenging life conditions. The inadequate awareness and understanding of the historically negative cultural assumptions attached to disability, race, gender, and class were significant factors causing this inadequate view. I recall that during informal conversations with Jade, she indicated a limitation of institutional treatment by saying, "Because in here, we only see same girls and same people, you know." Young females are placed in particular social institutions based on the institutional labels that represent the *problems* they have. The institutions themselves already inform the power structure where girls' problems are examined from the institutional point of view-- from the top of the power-ridden social hierarchies. Their authoritative power and its fault-finding gaze on young females with institutional labels do not require of them that they interrogate their own power, assumptions, and the value systems that significantly shape those institutional purposes and goals.

I also found the embeddedness of the cultural imagery of disability in everyday institutional practices, particularly in schools. Personally, I never had to be called an “IEP person” as a school-age girl simply because of the different educational system in my home country. I only could imagine the negative ramifications of an education-related disability label for children because of my own experience of disability. The participants taught me that value-free disability labels do not exist in the school system. Their reactions to a disability label were more intense than I had expected. The negative memories, thoughts, and feelings about being labeled as disabled commonly seen in their stories convinced me of the oppressive nature of the labeling system exercised in the existing school system. Their concerns about being perceived as different from others were a piece of evidence that the continuing changes in disability labels have not transformed the hegemonic assumptions and negative stigma attached to disability.

My participants demonstrated their own unique ways of negotiating the disability label imputed to them. An interesting finding was that when the girls found services provided to be beneficial, they were willing to compromise on their perception of the negative ramifications of being labeled. Or, to it put differently, the effectiveness of the services provided could overshadow the cultural imagery of disability. Understandably, when they could not find benefits in the services planned and implemented, feelings of resentment and frustration about their special education status were the common result. Even though I carried with me to the research sites my conceptual and theoretical views of disability, or because of the critical lens that these views embraced, I tried not to presume how the participants perceived their disability labels. This stance turned out to

be fruitful in that it allowed me to see how my participants redefined disability and transformed it to possibilities for serving young females who are going to create their own history. The redefined disability label was an exciting finding of the study because it was the participants who assigned a new role and definition to their disability labels. This finding can bring more resources to young females who are labeled as disabled as well as to those who wish to empower them. Needless to say, the transformation of disability may not be actualized without emancipating the concept of disability at organizational, institutional, and societal levels, because it requires not only the individual transformation of disability but also the cultural transformation of it.

The complex dynamics of disability intersecting with other social categories were illustrated in the participants' shifting social identities and their use of their multiple marginalities as a source of strength in achieving high school completion and pursuing further academic and vocation goals. Their sense of being understood and accepted were found to be very important factors for their attempts to succeed as students because these factors strongly affected their sense of connection with others as well as the outer world. Very importantly, their need to have someone to push them harder highlighted their resilience and strength as young warriors, illustrated the weaknesses of the existing educational system, and documented the fundamental social structure that forces those who have less access and fewer resources to try harder.

Perhaps as a female with a disability more than as a critical disabled researcher, the emerged themes, which I discussed in response to research question 3, relate to my own experience of disability. For example, Jade expressed that she often feels that no

matter how hard she tries she cannot catch up with others' expectations of her. For Jade, asking for help is one of the hardest things she sometimes has to do. Because of the pressure of the normate culture, she said, as long as she fails to do something, it basically means that she did not make enough effort to be successful. There seems no end point to the struggle. It is not easy to feel this way. As a female with a disability, I could relate to what Jade said. Just as Jade, I used to feel the same way—that I must make greater efforts to do things which others can do effortlessly. Very honestly, I still often feel the same way now. When I heard Jade expressing her frustrations, I found a common social destiny preordained by the normate value system.

One of the most critical elements of the study was that the stories of the girls were told to be heard. I consider this a contribution this study offers to the mainstream educational scholarship. It is noteworthy that when I asked the girls if they had any preferences for an alias to substitute for their real names, all the girls insisted that I use their real names. They wanted me make their lived experiences known, even though some of their stories included their painful memories and experiences. One of the girls even told me to ask her mother for permission to use her real name for the study. Their sincerity and courage were privileges that I received throughout the course of the study. I always felt that they were there for me more than I was there for them. If it had not been for the understanding of the girls who found and gave significance to the study, I would not have been able to write about the experience of disability. It was the same with individuals who agreed to support the study. Without their understanding, I would not

have been able to meet the girls, talk with them, and understand the complexity of the barriers they were facing every day.

### **Unexpected Dimensions of the Study**

I had expected even before entering the research field that understanding and explicating the experience of disability would be a tremendous challenge because of the nature of disability experience that is complex, contradictory, and fragmentary. The way I presented and discussed my findings may give the audience an impression that disability often is totally invisible in the stories told as if disability is not an issue in my participants' ongoing struggles. My intention was to avoid forcing the experience of disability to be visible just for the study's sake. Rather, my hope was to illuminate the context-laden nature of disability experience. It was, however, an ironic realization that it was the complexities in the lived experiences as young females with a disability that led me to the study and then I ended up re-realizing the impossibility of capturing in my study how complex the girls' experiences are.

### ***Methodological Dilemmas***

The difficulty of capturing the complexity of the disability experience and its intersectionality with other social identities was evidenced in my realization of the shortcomings of the multiple methodologies. It was extremely frustrating when I found that focusing on one dimension of the young women's lives, say disability, made me feel as if I was almost entirely putting other dimensions aside. However, when I tried to integrate and portray their attempts to maximize security and options for their survival by



shifting among their multiple social identities, I only had to admit the impossibility of doing so.

As a critical example, huge conflicts arose when I began recognizing the importance of understanding and explicating the hardships the girls have to cope with in their homes from the perspectives of their parents, more specifically their mothers, who were likely to have lived in similar challenging life circumstances as young females. When I attempted to portray the hardships the girls have to cope with in their homes, I necessarily had to indicate home as “a factor” for the girls’ struggles. However, my fieldwork led me to a realization that the girls’ mothers also were the survivors of multiple forms of social oppressions, who must have needed more attention and services just as their daughters need them today. I must emphasize that even though the girls indicated ongoing conflicts with their mothers, when asked who had been the most helpful person in the midst of their setbacks, most participants named their mothers as the ones who had been there for them. If I could integrate the lenses of the parents of the girls who could testify to the nature of the complexity of the social realities, this study could have offered a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of young females dealing with a range of life challenges on a daily basis.

Wolcott (1975) suggested that researchers who cannot afford time and funds for several years for one study might want to avoid doing ethnographical research, particularly school ethnography, because of the multiple dimensions that they must recognize and analyze. I now have to agree with him to some extent as I acknowledge that the methodological dilemmas I experienced could have been ameliorated if enough

time and funds were available for me to engage in the study for an extended period of time. However, I still felt the need to engage in this multi-methodological project because if research inquiries, particularly ethnographic inquiries, only belong to those who are able to afford long-term, costly research it means that the act of research inquiries essentially is power-ridden. If those who are able to conduct research do not take a critical approach aiming to expose institutional barriers and social inequality, the multiple dimensionalities of the challenges young female learners may have been facing may continue to be unattended.

Hopefully, more researchers will give young females at multiple margins more and louder voices. When these voices are integrated, we will be able to see a better picture, which will provide better support for them. Most importantly, their collective voices need to be informed to empower them for their own transformation.

### ***Dilemma of Writing and Being a Disabled Researcher***

While the difficulty in recruiting participants was one of the most frustrating aspects of the study, writing as a researcher became another challenge. I indicated that it was the complexity of disability that oriented me to the study. I became committed to this study because I wanted to make known the struggles of young females at multiple margins *because I knew what it was like* and how important it was to do so for *us*. Through the fieldwork, I came to realize how much I, as a female with a disability, also had held my own disability experience inside. I would talk about my disability experience with no problem if it was to advocate for people with disabilities who have a common social destiny. However, if it was for my own sake, I did not know what to say because

my disability experience rarely had been expressed in writing or talking. Further, I have experienced disability, but it hardly has been told even in my native language, and so this turned out to be the greatest challenge in writing the experience of disability in a language that is not my first.

My awareness that it is impossible to separate myself from what I have observed and listened to, or my subjectivity, interfered with writing my findings subjectively. In other words, though it may sound contradictory, I wished I could be more subjective concerning my disability experience. It was my critical reflective inquiry into how my subjectivity would affect my analysis and interpretation that prevented my subjectivity from influencing my writing. That is, my objective realization of my inability to write or talk about my own disability experience made it very difficult to write about my participants' experiences, because my interpretations never can be independent from my own subjective experience of disability. I came to a psychological halt where my subjective experience of disability, which allowed me to relate to my participants, did not let me write about their experience of disability that had to come through my interpretations of my own disability experiences. I had to go through a prolonged stage of closing my thinking process down, making it almost impossible to write any words. In addition, besides disability experiences, I shared similar experiences with the girls' stories, some of which included victimization of sexual assaults and violence exposure, which also helped me to grasp the nature of their daily struggles and the complexity that their experience of disability entailed. Again, it was ironic to encounter this conflict when

those shared experiences were something that led me to the study. My reflection on the limitations of the study came after I went through this researchers' dilemma.

### **Limitations of the Study**

With regard to the general limitations of the study, I acknowledge that the data collected and analyzed were within this particular research framework. The stories told thus were reported in the way I framed the research questions as well as my hermeneutic efforts to make the participants' everyday experiences of disability and its intersection of other social categories visible. The stories of the participants continued to be unfolded within my own ability to understand and interpret the meanings, or more specifically the feelings, thoughts, attitudes, reactions, and reflections, which they conveyed through the stories that they shared.

Likewise, the girls' lived stories *as told* were greatly influenced not only by me as researcher whose disciplinary knowledge prioritized particular aspects of their lived experiences but also by me as an individual whose cultural, historical, linguistic, racial, and ethnic background differed greatly from those of the participants. And yet, from ethnographical standpoint, these differences enabled me to observe phenomena from different and potentially productive cultural and historical angles.

As for the approach to the discussion of my findings, I tried not to let my own interpretations of the girls' stories interfere with the meanings that they have given to their lived experiences. However, I realized quickly that verbatim transcriptions cannot fully articulate the participants' kindness, warmth, sense of humor, insights, and politeness. This frustrated me, especially at the stage of writing about my interactions

with them. The harder I tried to re-live their stories in my writing, the greater I found the difficulty of doing so. Ultimately, I had to convince myself that my observations and interpretations of what, how, and why they see what they go through would never be able to be a completely accurate representation.

Additionally, due to the characteristics of the physical locations where my participants were placed, I chose not to give detailed descriptions when doing so would risk revealing the identity of the participants. Given that the study employed critical ethnographic method, not being able to provide in depth descriptions is a significant limitation of the study.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Future Research**

The participants' stories shed light on many aspects of educational practices warranting additional research. First, more studies are needed to understand the strong influences of the cultural assumptions and stigma attached to the idea of special education and disability as well as disability labels. Given the negative ramifications of disability labels expressed by the participants, these concepts need to be deconstructed and reexamined so as to understand students with disabilities from their viewpoint. Second, as I stressed earlier, while the study did not fully include the perspectives of parents of young females at multiple margins, the challenges facing the families of these girls need to be examined and explicated in order to provide meaningful educational and related services. Parents of young females with disabilities in the juvenile justice system have been underrepresented in educational scholarship. This crucial area needs to be explored and understood. Third, this study was only a start to make the everyday

struggles of young females with disabilities visible. Additional qualitative studies are needed to understand the nature of their everyday struggles which make it difficult to them to successfully complete high school with a diploma.

As the final statement, I would like to introduce an email message from a mother of one of the participants. I met her on the day when her daughter was ordered into the custody of the state where I was conducting that part of the study. In spite of the difficulty, she told me that she was happy to help me to understand more about challenges facing, not anyone else, but *us*. Near the completion of the fieldwork, I received an email from this mother regarding her daughter's stay at her group home. I wrote her back, expressing my appreciation for their support and participation in the study. She responded:

I am happy to hear that you are continuing your work and you were able to learn from us. Young ladies of color are facing a great number of challenges and need all the advocates they can get. I appreciate your comments and you have made a lasting impression on me as well. Continue in your work and I look forward to hearing from you.

### **Final Remarks**

My participants have shared their experiences of disability. Many of their stories have remained unheard until now. The variety in their life circumstances, personalities, ages, and locations illustrated both the particular and the general in the experience of disability. The particular highlighted how diverse the experience of disability can be. The uniquely situated perspective of the participants informed the conflict-ridden processes of making sense of their everyday experiences of disability. The participants portrayed how

their experiences of disability were mediated by differing perceptions of and attitudes toward young females who are identified as having a disability. Their stories also enabled me to see the general—how the ability/disability social system continued to reproduce the cultural imagery of disability held in the general culture and particularly in the school culture, which was largely associated with the way they reacted to the disability labels and/or their perceived opportunity structure, especially in the academic domain.

Through this study, it became clear that the quality of institutional practices and human interactions are critical mediators that greatly affect the meaning that the girls give to their experience of disability, race, gender, and social class. I conclude that it is empathy that determines how one interacts with others who share or do not share similar life experiences or how one can relate to others whose life experiences are different from one's own. The experience of disability is relational and contextual. This means that young females with disabilities do not have to feel disabled if society does not disable them.

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## APPENDIX A

### A LIST OF SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

#### School and general school experience

1. What is a typical day like when you are in school?
2. How do you describe your school? How do you describe yourself as a student?
3. What is the best experience you remember about school? What made it the best?
4. What is the worst experience you've had at school? What made it the worst?
5. Have you ever sensed that what you say or write is not taken seriously by others?  
In what situation did you feel that way?
6. Have you ever felt that you are discriminated by others? Think about a time you felt you were discriminated against. Can you tell me the story of what happened and what it felt like?
7. Who was the most helpful to you during that time? How was he/she helpful?
8. Have you ever seen yourself in a difficult situation in completing high school? If yes, what, do you think, make it difficult for you to do so? How have you handled your situation so far?
9. What is it like for you being a young female living in today's society?
10. If someone asks you to speak or write about your life stories in front of people, who do you think listen to your stories seriously?
11. When do you feel you are cared? When do you feel your needs are respected? What make you feel that you are cared and respected? Can you give me some example? How often have you felt that you are cared or respected when you are in schools?

#### Special education services

12. Can you recall when you were told that you had a disability? What was your reaction? Why do you think you had that reaction?
13. Do you remember who told you that you were going to receive special education services? What did you think about that?
14. Do you remember receiving special education services in school (e.g., going to resource rooms)? What was that like?
15. As you look back on your experience in your schools what are other events that stand out in your mind? What do you think makes them so important?
16. When you think of yourself, what identity (identities) do you think you can describe yourself best? Has the disability label ever affected your idea of who you are? How your disability label affect your idea of "who you are" when you are outside the school?
17. What positive changes have occurred in your life since you began receiving special education services?

18. What negative changes have occurred in your life since you began receiving special education services?
19. What do you think is good about having a disability label?

Future goals and thoughts relating to services received

20. Where do you see yourself in two years? What kind of person do you hope to be then?
21. Do you see any barriers or difficulties you may have to fight against as you try to achieve your goals?
22. How do you think school can help you achieve your goals? How can special education program assist you in achieving your goals? How might school interfere with you reaching your goals? How might special education program interfere with you reaching your goals?
23. The purpose of special education services in schools is to help students to be successful in schools and to achieve their goals after they graduate from the schools. Think about the special education services you have received so far. How much have they been helpful? How do you evaluate them? Are you satisfied with the services? If yes, can you give me examples of good things about receiving special education services? If no, can you give me examples of why the services have not been helpful for you? How, do you think, can they be improved?
24. Why do you think many young girls now are involved in behavior that brings them to the juvenile justice system?
25. How has it been easy or difficult for you to stay focusing on your school work while you are in school? If the answer is difficult, what make it difficult for you to stay focusing on school work?
26. You have been receiving (or have received) some types of educational and related services from the juvenile justice system. They may include, therapy, counseling, and so on. How have they been helpful or not helpful for you? Can you give me some examples of services that you think are helpful? Can you give me some ideas for adults to think more about how services from the juvenile justice system can help young women be successful in trying to overcome many life challenges?
27. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?
28. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

## APPENDIX B

### A SHORT QUESTIONNAIRE

---

Today's Date:

Place:

Time:

---

#### *General Information- About you*

1. Please mark your race/ethnicity that most fit to your identity.

☐ African American    ☐ Asian/Pacific Islander    ☐ Asian American  
☐ Caucasian/European American    ☐ Mexican    ☐ Mexican American  
☐ Latina/Chicana    ☐ Native American    ☐ Others (Specify)\_\_\_\_\_

2. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_

3. What is your grade? \_\_\_\_\_

#### *About Educational Services*

4. Choose **any** of the following services that you feel would be helpful to you in achieving your goals.

<input type="checkbox"/> Anger management	<input type="checkbox"/> Child care services
<input type="checkbox"/> College entrance exam training (e.g., SAT)	<input type="checkbox"/> College experience
<input type="checkbox"/> Communication skills training	<input type="checkbox"/> Community work experience
<input type="checkbox"/> Computer skills training	<input type="checkbox"/> Couple and marriage counseling
<input type="checkbox"/> General Equivalency Diploma (GED) training	<input type="checkbox"/> Grief management
<input type="checkbox"/> Home repair and maintenance training	<input type="checkbox"/> Job interview skills training
<input type="checkbox"/> Job preparation skills	<input type="checkbox"/> Mentoring/Role models
<input type="checkbox"/> On-site working training	<input type="checkbox"/> Parenting skills training
<input type="checkbox"/> Physical/Sexual abuse counseling	<input type="checkbox"/> Self-advocacy skills training
<input type="checkbox"/> Sewing and clothing care training	<input type="checkbox"/> Sexuality issues
<input type="checkbox"/> Social skills training	<input type="checkbox"/> Study skills training
<input type="checkbox"/> Substance abuse counseling	<input type="checkbox"/> Transportation and drive education
<input type="checkbox"/> Tutoring	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify)



5. What kind of work or education do you hope to see yourself in after graduation from high school?

☐ University or colleges (4-year program)  
☐ Community colleges/Technical colleges  
☐ Military Services (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, etc.)  
☐ Employment (Full time)  
☐ Employment (Part-time)  
☐ Other (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_ )

*About Special Educational Services*

6. When did you start receiving special education services from your schools?

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

7. Under which category do you receive special education services from your schools?

Category: \_\_\_\_\_

8. Do you currently receive special education services from your school?

Yes      No

9. Do you know what an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is?

Yes      No

10. Have you attended your IEP meeting?

Yes      No

11. Have your teachers talked about your IEP plan?

Yes      No

12. Are you satisfied with your IEP?

Yes      No

**APPENDIX C**  
**KEY TO TRANSCRIPTS**

[ ]: Background information

... : Pause

(...): Material edited out

Capital letters: Words stressed

**APPENDIX D****FOOTNOTES**

1. Normate: Garland-Thomson (2004) defined the term to refer to “the corporal incarnation of culture’s collective, unmarked, normative characteristics” (p. 10) which signifies standardized bodies or “definitive human beings.” The term also can be traced to Goffman (1986). In *Stigma: Note on the management of spoiled identity*, he characterized an idea, complete image of male in America as “a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports” (p. 128).

## APPENDIX E

### PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

	Adoncia	Alexis	Allison	Andre	Jade
Age	15	13	16	14	16
Race	Mixed (American Mexican)	African American	White	African American	African American
Grade	9	7	10	8	9
Educational Placement	Residential Facility	Public Middle School	Alternative	Alternative	Residential Facility
Special Education Category	BED *	Sent for Evaluation	SLI ** → Exited	EMD ***	N/A
Most Current Psychiatric Diagnoses	PTSD	Major Depression	Substance Disorders	N/A	IED ****
Offense Charged	Disorderly Conduct	Simple Assault	Simple Assault Substance abuse	Simple Assault Larceny	Simple assault
Most Current Residence	Residential Facility	Home	Home	Group Home	Residential Facility

	Lavon	Monica	Michel	Nicole	Renee
Age	15	15	12	14	17
Rece	African American	Mixed (African American White)	African American	African American	African American
Grade	9	10	7	8	12
Current Educational Placement	Public High	Public High	Alternative	Public High S	Public High
Special Education Category	EMD → SLD *****	BED	N/A	BED	BED
Most Current Psychiatric Diagnoses	Bipolar Disorder AD/HD	None	Bipolar Disorder	Bipolar Disorder AD/HD	None
Offense Charged	Simple Assault	Simple Assault	Simple Assault	Simple Assault	Simple Assault
Most Current Residence	Group Home	Home	Home	Group Home	Home

Note. \* BED: Behavioral/Emotional Disability; \*\* SLI: Speech-Language Impairments  
 \*\*\* EMD: Educatable Mentally Disabled; The label has changed to *Intellectual Disabilities*  
 \*\*\*\* IED: Intermittent Explosive Disorder; \*\*\*\*\* SLD: Specific Language Disabilities

## **APPENDIX F**

### **EXAMPLES OF WORKING FREE NODES**

1. AGE
2. Age Talk
3. Assumptions held in social institutions
4. Asymmetrical power relations
5. Barriers
6. Barriers and limitations facing me as researcher
7. Being Heard
8. CLASS
9. Class Talk
10. COLLABORATION
11. COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF GIRLS
12. Conflicts of girls' world
13. Connection to the larger life context
14. Context of Disability
15. Context of Disability in the normate society
16. CONTRADICTIONS
17. Cultural Continuity
18. Cultural Politics
19. Cultural Themes - Professionals
20. Cultural Themes - Girls
21. Deep insecurities regarding one's capacities
22. Definitions of the situation
23. Deprived education
24. Descriptions of the research sites
25. DISABILITY
26. Disability as an irrelevant life problems (Girls)
27. Disability as Self-referencing concept
28. Disability Talk
29. Disconnection between Disability and Problem behavior
30. Essence and Components of Collaboration
31. Events
32. EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY
33. For the sake of girls- Whatever can help my child
34. GENDER
35. Gender Talk
36. Girls' Conceptualization of Mental Health
37. GIRLS' DEFINITION OF EDUCATION
38. Girls' fighting
39. Girls' identified Problems and Conflict in school
40. Girls' judgment over things
41. Girls' Perspectives on social institutions

42. Girls' Reality and ideas about Education
43. Girls' resistance
44. Girls' Self articulation of themselves
45. Girls' sense of Proved Wrong
46. HEGEMONIC UNDERSTANDING OF DISABILITY
47. HISTORICAL CONDITIONS
48. History
49. Identity Claim by Girls
50. IMPACTS OF DISABILITY LABEL
51. Informants (Girls') ways of thinking about people and objects
52. Informants (Professionals') ways of thinking about people and objects
53. Institutional Conceptualization and Practice of Mental Health Needs
54. INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF VALUES
55. INSTITUTIONALIZED DEFINITIONS OF POVERTY
56. Internalization of disability
57. Irrelevance
58. Irrelevance in the context of disability (Professionals, institutions)
59. Juvenile Talk
60. Labeling, Labels (Girls)
61. Labeling, Labels (Parents, Institutions, Professionals)
62. Life as Experienced
63. Life as lived
64. Life as Told
65. Like everyone else
66. Materials (Girls)
67. MATRIX OF ECONOMIC CONDITIONS, MOTHERS
68. Meaning of Education
69. Means to deal with the Discursive Practice
70. Means to deal with the Discursive Practice (Professionals, institutions)
71. Member Checks for my data
72. Mental health needs
73. My analysis of Situated Perspectives (Girls, parents)
74. My Reflective comments, notes
75. Narrative, The structure of talk itself
76. NATURE OF SOCIAL INSTITUTION
77. Nobody understands me
78. On Labeling, Labels
79. Otherwise Everything falls off
80. Parental involvement
81. Pedagogical Implications
82. People hate on you.
83. Perceived lack of Social Supports and Network
84. Perpetuating the cycle
85. Perspectives held by informants
86. Political, economic, institutional regime of producing Truth
87. Politics
88. POLITICS OF LABELING
89. Portraits of the girls

90. Possible roles of special education
91. Problematics
92. Process
93. Professionals' view of what's lacking
94. RACE
95. Racial Talk
96. REACHING OUT VS. TREATMENT
97. Reality and idea about Special Education (Professionals)
98. Reality - material condition
99. Reality - material condition (Girls)
100. Reality - material condition (Parents)
101. Relationships and Social structure
102. Resistance
103. Role-Configuration
104. Roles of Disability
105. School as places for
106. School Conceptualization and Practice of Mental Health Needs
107. Sense of intrusion
108. Setting, Context (Descriptive Fieldnotes)
109. Shift to Collaboration
110. Social Construction Matrix
111. Social Exchange
112. Social problems identified by girls
113. Social Reality articulated by the girls
114. Story-worthiness
115. Strategies
116. TESTIMONIALS FROM PROFESSIONALS
117. The Discursive Practice, The Status Quo
118. THE JUSTICE UNDERSTANDING OF SPECIAL EDUCATION
119. The personal is political
120. They know where I'm coming from
121. Third-World analytic lens (Mine)
122. TO BE LABELED
123. TRANSFORMATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES
124. Type of disability
125. Unequal distribution of Resources and Opportunities
126. Unsureness about the future
127. Values that serve the status quo
128. Women's world